

A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a yellow short-sleeved dress with a dark belt, stands in a field of white daisies. She is looking towards a small yellow cottage with a thatched roof and two chimneys in the background. The scene is set in a lush green field with trees and a blue sky with light clouds.

AN ARTISAN'S MELODIC LOVE

ABIGAIL AGAR

An Artisan's Melodic Love

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ABIGAIL AGAR

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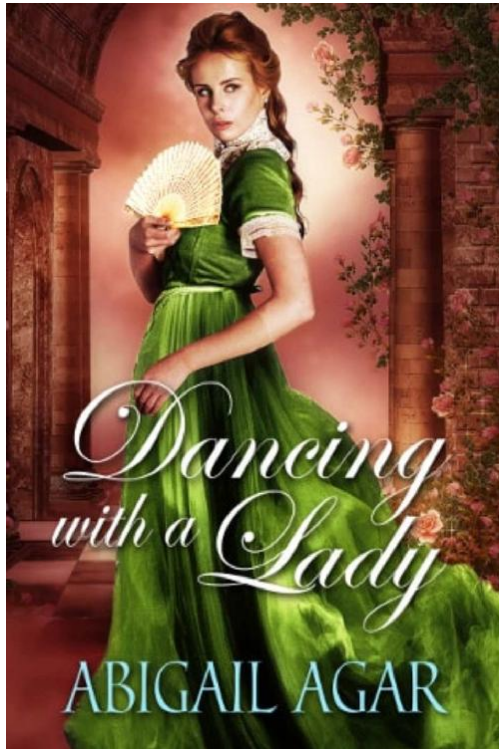
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An Artisan's Melodic Love

Introduction

For the gifted Nell Hawkins, life beyond her cottage remains a mystery. Even though her overprotective mother is trying to keep her away from the outside world, Nell's fate has other plans. After all, her devotion and love for making instruments and rescuing animals, were never enough to stop her dreaming of the exciting life out there.

Will her unexpected encounter with a charming stranger be the start of a journey towards the freedom she is craving for?

The daring Lord Henry Collins knows his place. As the future Earl of Rosewell, he must prove he is worthy of inheriting his father's position and title. Yet, when he loses his way in the woods, he becomes enchanted by the most hauntingly beautiful sound he has ever heard. Little did he know that this magical melody comes from a strange instrument made by a young woman, who will irreversibly change his life forever.

Will he risk his title and reputation for a chance at true, unconditional love with a commoner?

As Nell's and Henry's different worlds collide, they know that their parents will never approve of their match, but it is too late to escape their strong attraction. Despite being determined to embrace their feelings and meet in secret, a hidden reality from the past will soon jeopardize their happiness. Torn between love and duty, will Nell and

Henry manage to overcome their family's prejudice and finally dream of their own happily ever after?

Chapter 1

Nell Hawkins nimbly looped a string through a hole in a slender length of wood. Pulling it taut and securing it on the base of the instrument, she smiled.

This was her newest invention, and she was eager to give it a try. She intended that it should have eight strings and be played with a device similar to a violin bow. First, however, she would need to get the strings in tune. Only then would she discover whether she might be successful.

A wisp of blonde hair fell in her eyes, and Nell paused from her work to tie the hair back. She didn't have time for little distractions like this. The most important thing was ensuring that she got the rest of the stringing done today.

At the sound of footsteps, Nell looked up and saw Mary coming up the path through the trees and approaching the cottage. She smiled and sighed with relief.

"Thank goodness you have come. I was worried that I might not be able to finish today," Nell said.

"You know I would not neglect you," Mary teased. "Here. I do believe this is what you were asking for?"

Nell took the piece of metal in her hand. It would act perfectly as a wrench for the tuning pegs she had crafted.

"This is ideal. Thank you, Mary. I would not be able to finish this were

it not for your help,” Nell said.

“And what exactly are you finishing? This is ... well, I have never seen something quite so strange,” Mary said.

“It is quite similar to a harp, actually,” Nell explained.

“A harp? I can see that it has strings and is a good length, but what of the shape?”

Nell smiled once more and looked at the unique form of the instrument. It looked as though it held the form of an S at certain angles, but the top leaned away, giving something of a loop. The strings stretched from their position in the loop to the base, which was held steady by a plank.

“The shape gives way for more movement with the bow, and I can play with more liberty. I do believe this is the most beautiful instrument I have ever designed, and I am hopeful that the sound and quality shall match it,” she answered.

Mary squinted and then smiled as well.

“I have never learnt to play an instrument, but perhaps, one day, you shall teach me one of yours,” she said.

“I would love to do so,” Nell replied.

She continued showing Mary what she intended to do next, installing

the pegs to tune each string as necessary. If she could finish that day, she would immediately start playing music on it and could indulge in her creativity for a while.

“Wherever did you get the idea for this?” Mary asked, still looking at the instrument with surprise.

Nell smiled to herself, remembering the dream when she had first seen it.

“I was sleeping and, in my dream, I was in a beautiful garden. The most beautiful I have ever seen,” she began. “I was playing this instrument with Daisy at my side, and I was lost to the music until I ... I sensed that someone was there.”

“Who?” Mary asked, leaning in close.

Nell laughed.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. But it was a man. I could not see his face. I just knew that he was there,” she replied.

Nell got back to work, not wanting to linger too much on the memory. It had been so lovely that it was difficult to leave the garden in the dream and wake to the real world once more.

“What does your mother think of it?” Mary asked.

Nell sighed, looking up to the sky for a moment. She inhaled the fresh

air around them, a moment of relief as she prepared to divulge into the rather difficult topic of her mother.

“She likes it thus far. But you know how she is,” Nell said.

“Actually, I know very little about how she is, Nell. Only what you have told me,” Mary responded.

She was right. Nell had shared with Mary about life’s difficulties in the cottage with her mother, but Nell had not told her everything. She had said that her mother was cautious about Nell meeting other people but had not shared that the root of that fear was related to the idea of Nell meeting men in particular.

“Yes, of course. Well, my mother likes my instruments and enjoys it when I play them, but she does find it difficult at times because I know that she fears my reason for making them. She wonders if I have some grand desire to perform or to make something of myself through music.

Although she has this fear, I wish she would simply accept that I have no such goals. I simply enjoy their creation and sound. She need not worry about anything more,” Nell said.

Mary screwed her brows together and looked closely at Nell with evident concern.

“What is it?” Nell asked.

“You may not have a desire to do more with your music, but what about more with your life?”

The question haunted Nell each day. She loved the cottage and her mother, but that did not negate how difficult it was to live this way. She was isolated nearly all the time.

Her mother knew that Nell had a friend named Mary, but she had not approved of Nell being too carried away by other people as it would mean that she might socialise with gentlemen of a higher status than the one they bore.

“Please, Mary,” Nell said quietly. She didn’t want to answer the question aloud. She preferred to let it go and accept that her mother needed her, and there was no reason to try and move on or create any unnecessary difficulties.

“Very well. If you do not wish to discuss it, I shall let you alone. But if you do ever care to speak with me about these challenges, you know I am here for you, Nell,” Mary said.

“And for that, I am grateful,” Nell replied with a smile.

“Now, I suppose I ought to leave before your mother returns. But you may come to see me whenever she is willing to let you,” Mary said.

Nell hoped she would be allowed soon but could not be sure. In the meantime, she was simply grateful to have a friend like Mary. After the two said their goodbyes, Nell returned to her work when Daisy, the sparrow she had tamed, flew down to perch beside her.

“Ah, there you are, my dear. Drawn by the sound of tuning strings?” Nell asked.

The little bird chirped in reply, and lonely as she was, Nell went on as if they were in a real conversation, sharing her thoughts with Daisy about whether she had made the pegs too long or if the bow was too short. But by the time her mother returned home, Nell had finished the instrument to her satisfaction.

“Good heavens, Nell, that is lovely!” her mother said, sitting beside Nell on the large stones they had turned into steps outside the front door of the house.

“Thank you, Mother. Would you like to hear how it is played?” Nell asked.

“Very much!”

With her mother’s enthusiastic response, Nell went straight to it. There was a simple song she had composed as a child that she always chose when she created a new instrument, believing that it was a good way to tell how she felt about the new craft compared to the ones she had finished previously.

The sound was hauntingly lovely, with the draw of the bow adding a soft contrast to the tightly wound strings that would spring staccato notes if plucked. As the sombre tune picked up with a phrase of hope, Nell closed her eyes and drew the bow in a circular motion to hit every string in the right place. Once the song came to a close, she exhaled and finished with a soft vibrato.

For a moment, all was silent. Nell opened her eyes and looked at her mother’s face as Daisy hopped up onto Nell’s shoulder. Her mother’s eyes had tears in them, but she swiped at them in an effort to hide her

emotion.

“What is it, Mother?” Nell asked.

“Oh, nothing,” she sniffed in reply. “I was simply moved by your music. I cannot comprehend how you know precisely how to play each instrument when it is completed. Have you practiced much today while I was gone?”

Nell shook her head.

“I only finished a short time before you returned home,” she answered.

“Then how? How do you play it so well?”

Nell thought for a moment. She was aware that her mother was simply trying to change the subject, to hide the fact that there had been something in the music to affect her. But rather than continue pushing her mother for answers, Nell relented and chose to move on with the conversation and allow herself to be questioned instead.

“It is difficult to describe, but I hear the music—all of it—when I first see the image of the instrument in my mind. I simply know at once what it is that I am supposed to create. It is simple, really. I just know in my heart what it ought to sound like.

I picture myself playing, and I know the exact position my fingers must be in to make it all come together,” Nell explained.

“However you manage to do it, it is lovely. Well done, Nell. I think this may be my favourite of all the instruments you have created thus far,” her mother said.

“Thank you, Mother. It may be mine as well,” she said.

“What are you going to call it?”

With a smile, Nell gazed at the instrument once more before she answered.

“I have decided to call it a Bower. Much like where we live here, a cottage under the lovely shade of trees that break to a clear sky above, this is a piece of man and nature, a symbol of their union crafted into wood and string. It rises in this curvature, and I think the name suits it quite well,” Nell declared.

Her mother’s face flashed with pain, but only for a moment before it was replaced with a smile.

“That is a perfect name, darling. Well, I shall leave you to it. I am going inside to make supper,” her mother said, standing quickly and leaving Nell on the stone steps.

Daisy chirped again, and Nell held out her finger for the bird to hop up.

“Worry not, my dear. One day, we shall fly free together,” Nell whispered.

She truly did love her mother, but it was growing more and more difficult each day to remain at the cottage without the ability to roam freely. Nell often wondered why her mother had grown so overprotective, but there were no answers.

Rather, her mother would say something bitter about the noblemen and noblewomen, and then she would move the conversation onwards. Nell assumed her mother had faced an unpleasant interaction with them in the past, but she knew nothing more.

Nell's father had died only weeks before her birth in an accident on horseback. He had been a groom for a noble family and was thrown while training a steed. The family had done nothing to aid Nell's mother, and she had been left with only the cottage as a memory of him.

She often reminded Nell of this, which had been difficult to hear. Nell wished that she had a father around, someone to be with her, and another presence around the cottage.

Nell certainly hoped that there would be a day in the future when she would see more of the world, even if it was just going beyond their town. As it was, she was rarely even allowed in town and only with her mother.

And although she really had no desire to play her music in front of others, it did not mean that she had no desire to meet them.

For a while, the pain of it all was more than Nell wanted to think about, but by the time she was ready to put her things away and go

inside, she wondered if there really was a better world out there. Was there a place she could enjoy? A place she could feel free? Were there men and women with whom she could spend her time?

Or would she spend the rest of her days here, in the cottage, waiting for a miracle to emerge?

Chapter 2

Lord Henry Collins, son of the Earl of Rosewell, was on his way to Hartville when the road split in two directions. Without a sign to guide his path, Henry had to simply make a guess. Was Hartville to the left or the right?

He chose left.

Aware of the fact that his father would scold him for riding horseback as opposed to taking a coach for a business journey, Henry hoped that he had made the right decision.

The last thing he needed was another lecture from his father about how poorly he was running the business, about how he needed more diligence with his affairs, about the fact that potential investors would want to see him looking his best.

Henry shook the dark hair from his eyes, knowing he would need to brush it back with his fingers before meeting the business associates. He had planned to be early for the meeting, but as he continued down the road, he quickly realised that this did not seem to be the way to Hartville after all.

He pulled the reins and brought his horse to a stop. All he could see were trees. It was still possible that the village was ahead, but he had expected the road to be wider and more traveled than this. Scratching his head, he paused and looked around.

Suddenly, he heard the strangest sound. Ethereal and otherworldly,

Henry gasped, and his eyes darted in every direction, wondering where it was coming from. He had never been superstitious but was beginning to wonder if he had stumbled upon a haunted wood.

The song was unlike anything he had ever heard before, and it left him both enchanted and wary.

His mother had played the harp beautifully, and he would listen to her when he was a child, but she had passed away when he was only ten years of age. Since then, the sound of a harp had always made his heart ache.

But this was different. It sounded like a cross between a harp and a violin, something he'd never expected out here in the middle of trees and nothingness.

Curious as to the source of the music, Henry rode a little bit further, peering along the tree line for who might be responsible for the sound. At last, he could see where a path trailed off from the main road, and Henry led his horse slowly to it.

There, before his eyes, was a quaint little cottage with a striking young woman with her eyes closed as she played an instrument he had never seen before. Her blonde hair fell loosely around her shoulders, and he sensed the passion in her face as she played, deeply moved by the music.

Henry glanced around, not seeing anyone else with the young woman. He quickly dismounted from his horse. Not wanting to startle her, he remained quiet as he approached, expecting her to open her eyes at any moment or to hear his footsteps. But it quickly became clear that she was lost to the music.

Once Henry was only a few paces away, he felt deeply self-conscious, wondering if he ought to retreat or if it would be better to alert her to his presence somehow. He finally decided to softly clear his throat.

“Ah!” she yelped, jumping back and dropping the bow, nearly knocking over her instrument.

At once, her eyes grew wide with terror when she looked up at Henry in shock. She held the instrument defensively in front of her as though it were some sort of shield.

“F-forgive me!” Henry said, holding out his hands to show that he was no threat. “I did not mean to frighten or disturb you. I ... I simply wished to hear your music. I am lost on my way to Hartville and stumbled upon your cottage.”

Henry’s lengthy explanation did not appear to soothe the young woman, and she stared at him with trepidation, leaning back and quickly taking in the surroundings. Henry was unsure whether she was looking for a place to flee or an available weapon.

“Honestly, I did not mean to frighten you, and I mean you no harm. I shall go. I ... I just enjoyed your music and ... and do you know how I may get to Hartville?”

The woman looked at the ground with her large, brown eyes, framed beneath by freckles that spattered her face like stars in abstract. She was clearly trying to decide what to do next and what might be the wisest choice.

“Hartville is east of here,” she said quietly.

“Thank you. At the fork in the road, I came left. Should I have gone right?”

She nodded but remained otherwise silent and no longer met his gaze. Henry understood that she wanted him to leave ... but he found that he could not do so right away.

“I truly did not mean to frighten you,” he said.

“Yes, you mentioned that,” the young woman replied.

“If I may, I would like to know about the instrument you have there. Where did you get it?”

“Why?” she asked, holding it tighter and taking a step back.

“It is lovely. I have never heard a sound like that. Moreover, I am a businessman, and I was thinking that such an instrument would do very well if it were sold throughout England. I imagine many a musician would enjoy playing it,” he said, trying to come up with a quick excuse for his curiosity.

“I see,” she said, brightening a bit. “I call it a Bower. I finished

crafting it yesterday and have been practicing today.”

“You made that?” Henry asked in astonishment. He could hardly believe that this young woman, all alone in a cottage, had managed to craft such a beautiful instrument. It was unheard of to see something like this.

“Yes, I did. I make many instruments,” she said.

“Where did you come up with the design for it? Is it something you have seen before?”

“No. I simply thought of it and decided to make it. I am decent when working with wood, and I understand the mathematics of music. It really is very simple,” she said.

But Henry could not imagine the complexities of creating a design like this. He pondered it for a moment, wondering if there was a way he could convince this young woman not to be so wary of him. He needed to put her at ease so he might learn more.

“Would you be willing to play another song on it? I hope you do not mind; it is just that I have never heard such a unique sound as this, and I do think that many people would be grateful to hear such a sound,” he said, seeking an excuse to stay a little bit longer.

“I ... I suppose I could. But should you not be on your way towards Hartville?”

She was right. He needed to go. But how could he? Henry was intrigued by this striking and talented young woman. Moreover, he longed to hear her music again. He had not listened to a woman play with such passion since the death of his mother, and it was a wonder to be able to indulge in it once more.

“I have a little bit of time. I was early,” he lied.

“Very well. If you wish, I may play. Have you any song you wish to hear?” she asked.

“Whatever you desire. Do you compose your own?”

“Indeed,” she replied with a shy smile, her cheeks turning pink beneath those freckles.

“Then I should like to hear yours,” Henry said.

With that, the young woman began to play softly. The depth and emotion in the tune were overwhelming, but Henry could not help basking in it. He closed his eyes, certain that she would lull him to sleep with this music. Nevertheless, he was grateful for it, wanting little more than to breathe it in and enjoy the sound of it.

As the dreamy tune came to an end, Henry had to awaken to the world, and he quickly realised that he wanted nothing more than to go back to the ethereal realm he had left.

“It is astonishing music,” he said. His voice sounded strangely loud and harsh after such softness.

“Thank you,” she replied quietly, clearly uncomfortable with his compliments.

“Have you other instruments as well, or is this the first you have made?” Henry asked.

“Oh, I have created thirteen in total, although I am beginning to think this is my favourite,” she told him.

“Thirteen?” he asked in shock. “How have you done this? I am in awe.”

“It really is rather simple,” she said.

A sparrow flew from a tree above, landing just beside the young woman. She looked at the bird with fondness and then returned her attention to Henry.

“I have time and tools to carve the wood, and I can give it my full attention. I have made three percussive instruments, similar to a hand drum but each with additions. And four other stringed instruments, which are my preferred. The others are an assortment of unique sounds that I can hardly put into a category,” she said.

“You clearly have a skill for it,” Henry remarked.

“My mother enjoys it when I play the Belute, a large, horn instrument. The fingering is a bit tricky on that one, but I have been able to adapt,” she said.

“Your mother? So you are not alone here?”

Henry immediately sensed that this question caused the young woman some difficulty in answering.

“No, I am not alone,” she replied.

“I hope I have not disturbed your mother,” Henry said, feeling a strange impulse to apologise, although he was not sure why.

“It is perfectly all right. Anyway, I am glad that you like my instruments, but I ought not to keep you busy,” she said.

“I am none too busy,” he said hastily. Henry couldn’t understand why he was being so drawn to remain with this young lady. He found her fascinating but couldn’t say why. He knew that his father would be furious with him for spending time with a young woman of inferior birth like this, but his father never needed to know.

Besides, it was true that he owned a business and that something like these instruments would sell very well. Henry had come to town for the furniture business, had he not? Surely there was good reason to speak with the young lady about her work.

If Henry were to meet with an associate, why should he not also learn about another product that could be worth his time and effort?

It was a very weak excuse, but one that he was desperate to use nevertheless. No matter what Henry knew he was meant to be doing, he preferred to remain here, for now, trying to learn more about this mysterious young woman.

He would certainly need to depart soon for Hartville, but if he could take just a little longer and be close to this woman, he was happy to do so.

“I truly am curious about your instruments and the idea of making them available for others to purchase. If you would be willing, I should very much like to see some of the others you mentioned,” Henry said.

“If you so wish. Shall I get you tea while I am inside?”

“No, that is perfectly all right. I would simply like to see what else it is that you have crafted,” he replied.

With a nod, the young woman departed and left Henry to sit on the stone steps outside the house. He looked closely at the Bower and wondered how she had managed to make anything so beautiful.

Likewise, Henry wondered how she was so beautiful herself. He was as mesmerised by the young woman as he was by her music and knew he had to learn more about both.

Chapter 3

Nell steadied herself, exhaling slowly as she picked up the Belute and the Rollam from the shelves where she kept all her instruments. She wondered who this man was and why he appeared so interested in her music.

He was certainly a handsome gentleman, and that was even less expected than anything else. Nell could not recall ever having spoken to a man before, but to have a striking young man show up at the cottage and for him to be so curious? That was such a surprise to Nell that she nearly wondered if this were a test.

Although she had seen men in town, she had never spoken with one directly, and her mother was always cautioning her, saying that Nell must wait until her mother approved of a man's intentions before she could learn more about him.

After all, her mother wished to protect her, and this was the best way to ensure she was safe from anyone who might wish her harm.

Still, Nell could not help smiling to herself. Whoever he was, and whether or not he was a test, she couldn't help being intrigued by him. He was curious about her music and seemed curious about Nell as well. It was strange, this feeling. Was this how it felt to be ... flattered?

If this man honestly believed that her instruments were of value, that they were worth his time and interest, it meant that she had something worth sharing with the world, after all. That had always been something she had hoped for but believed she ought not to dream of.

Her mother was unwilling to share Nell, so how could she trust that anyone else would want anything from her?

With her arms full of the instruments, Nell made her way out to the gentleman. He had a noble appearance, a clean and tidy presence, and was quite fashionable and spoke with eloquence and intelligence. She wondered if he was a baron or simply a wealthy man. Perhaps he was even a landowner or someone important.

If so, Nell was further aware of the risks involved with their interaction. Her mother would be very disturbed by this entire circumstance. She would send the man away.

And perhaps Nell ought to have done that very thing. And yet, she could not. It would be rude to do such a thing. Not only that, but she was curious about him as well. It hardly seemed fair that this man had come, yet she would need to send him away in order to keep her mother happy.

Deciding that she would just wait and see what he wanted from her, Nell sat beside him and set down the instruments.

“These are beautiful. May I hear how you play them?” the man asked.

Nell nodded and brought the Belute to her lips. She played a soothing tune, one that often lulled her mother to sleep. It was calm and lovely, and she saw that it had a similar effect on the gentleman as it did upon her mother. He was clearly intrigued by it and moved to peace.

She finished the song, and he stared at her with intrigue. Nell took in the sight of his mossy green eyes. She had never seen eyes quite that colour before. His dark hair and tan skin made the effect of those eyes even more striking, and she couldn't help staring at him for a moment too long.

When he looked up, as though aware that he was being watched, Nell looked away in a hurry. She didn't mean to get caught in her interest, and she feared he would think she was too forward if he noticed her looking at him again.

Although somewhat shy and nervous, Nell still wanted to know more about the man. Unfortunately, she also knew that her mother would be returning home soon, and that would cause a great deal of struggle and disagreement. Nell feared that her mother would catch the two of them together and be furious.

"Your songs are exquisite. How did you learn to make music like this? Is your mother a musician as well?" he asked.

"No, not at all. I have always been inclined towards music, and she says that my father had an ear for it, but he was never afforded the opportunity to learn any instrument. But I have always enjoyed carving and seeing what sounds were created by my work.

So, that is how I began making instruments. I had a great many failures when I was younger, but I have improved over time," she explained.

"And what is this?"

“I call it a Rollam. It is similar to a tambourine, but with greater depth and, as you see here, the brass strikes the head of the drum,” she told him, handing it over.

The man shook the drum and listened to the depth of sound it created. It was the drum that Nell was the most pleased by. She felt that it captured a better sound than most. Still, she understood that her entertainment of this gentleman and her curiosity about him was dangerous.

She knew how much she was risking by allowing herself to indulge in this conversation and allowing the man to stay at the home.

“May I ask what you intend to do in Hartville?” she asked.

“Business,” he said. “As I told you, I have a business. We sell mostly furniture and the like, but that is why I think your instruments would be such a fine addition. Not only would they look lovely in any home, but I can see them becoming the most fashionable sound in all of England.”

At this remark, Nell was certain that the gentleman was merely saying this to appease her. Nevertheless, she found that she was, indeed, rather appeased. It was such a high compliment to be paid, learning that someone had such faith in her work and saw this sort of value in it. She wondered if there was anything more he intended. Did he want her to build more? Did he want her to teach others how to play?

Rather than pouncing upon him with these questions, Nell held herself back, grateful that he thought so highly of her and that he seemed to believe she could be a success. She longed to hear more, to be encouraged like this. Scarcely in her life had anyone told her these

things.

“You pay me too high a compliment, Sir,” she said, trying to remain humble under his attention. But Nell noticed that he was blushing as well, and she thought that, perhaps, he was also aware of the attention she was paying him.

Rather than shying away, she decided that this was her chance.

“I fear that you now know so much about me, but I still know very little about you,” Nell said. “Are you a musician? You have the interest of a man who has played before.”

The man laughed and shook his head.

“I fear not, my lady,” he replied, the words causing Nell’s heart to race.

“You have fooled me, then,” she replied.

“My mother rather enjoyed playing the harp. I can still hear the sound of it echoing in my mind. I recall the bright smile upon her face as she played. It gave her such a sense of joy,” he said, a faint sadness in his eyes.

“Your mother is gone, then?” Nell asked softly.

“Indeed, she passed away when I was but a boy. I still miss her, but I know that she lived a very good life, and she would have me do the

same,” he replied.

“My father died just before I was born. I remember nothing of him, but my mother has a small painting of his likeness,” Nell said.

“It is good that you have something to see, something that you might know what he looked like. Still, I am very sorry that he passed away and that you did not know him,” the man said.

“Thank you. My mother, however, would not be very happy about the fact that I am alone with a gentleman,” Nell said with a sigh, knowing that it was time to send him on his way. If he did not leave soon, her mother would arrive and be furious at Nell.

As if broken from a spell, the man sat back and sucked in a breath of air. Clearly, he now realised he had compromised her situation, giving rise to the questioning of her virtue for being alone with him.

“Oh yes, of course. You must forgive me. You mentioned your mother, and I did not ask whether she is home at present. I fear that I have been very selfish with your time and being here alone with you. I do offer my apologies,” he said.

“There is no reason to apologise,” she replied sadly. “It is just that I would not like to risk her coming home to find you here and thinking that you had some ill design.”

“Indeed, any good other would feel the same. With that in mind, I suppose that I shall have no choice but to depart,” he said, slowly, clearly hesitant to stand and leave her.

Nell's chest began to ache, not wishing to return to her lonely existence. She wished he could stay just a little while longer, but the sun was high in the sky, and within the hour, her mother would arrive.

Would she ever see this man again? Would she ever have another opportunity to meet someone? This had been such an exciting new experience, but Nell didn't want to give it up. She didn't want him to leave. In the flash of a moment, she wondered if she could go with him. Just for a day.

Just to see the world beyond her cottage and even to explore Hartville without her mother's supervision, without being limited to the same three or four shops they always went into.

But he took a step away and smiled at her.

"It was lovely meeting you," he said.

"And you as well," she replied.

Nell wanted to ask the man for his name but felt awkward and frightened to do so. She imagined that was the duty of a man to initiate, but if he wanted to ask her name, something was holding him back. Otherwise, perhaps he had not even thought about it. Perhaps it did not matter.

"Thank you for allowing me to hear your music, and I do hope to hear it again," he said.

“You are most welcome,” Nell said, knowing the statement would not be true if her mother had been home.

With that, the man turned to leave but flashed one more look in Nell’s direction. He then continued on his way and went to his horse. Nell watched him mount the steed, and a small part of her wanted to call out in warning that her father had died on a horse’s back, but she refrained.

Instead, she watched him go, riding off until he was beyond the trees, and she could see him no more.

The entire experience left her with a sense of curiosity and delight. She was in awe of what had passed and wished for nothing more than the chance to see him again. If he were truthful and really did intend to return to see her again, Nell knew that nothing would stop her from welcoming him.

Not even her own mother. Not even if it meant she would have to beg and plead.

The stranger had changed something within Nell, and all she could think about now was how desperately she wanted to know this new part of herself ... almost as much as she wanted to know him.

Chapter 4

Henry could not stop thinking about the young woman he had met. She was unlike anyone he had ever known before. With her beautiful face and rather unique character, he didn't think it was possible to ever meet someone like her again. Not only was she lovely, but she was sweet and gentle and kind.

The creativity was unmatched by any other, and her instruments maintained such an ethereal quality that he didn't think it possible to hear such a beautiful sound again. She was like an angel from above, and Henry was a man desperate to find her again.

Henry had finally discovered the village of Hartville. He endured the meeting that he was supposed to have and hurriedly finished his work. Although he was meant to stay for three days, he could not bear to stay longer than two.

Knowing that he should make his way directly back to London and find his father to discuss the business matters, he instead decided it would be more beneficial to him if he made his way back towards the cottage.

However, as he made his way back towards the main road, he could not find the fork he was searching for. Instead, he simply stumbled upon the main road without ever finding where it branched off.

For a moment, Henry started to think that he had made a mistake and taken a wrong turn. Surely he was lost. But much to his surprise, he quickly discovered that he was actually on the path back to the city. He had not got lost after all.

So where was the cottage? Where was the turn he was supposed to take? It made no sense. Henry grew frustrated as he rode his horse back to where he thought he was meant to go. It made no sense, and there had to be a reason for this.

But as he turned around, he still could not find it. Eventually, Henry knew that he had no choice other than to give up. If he could not find her, there was no reason to continue looking. He would only make a fool of himself and cause problems.

Not only that, but his father would be so angry if he learned that Henry had not spent more time on the business while he was gone.

Thus, Henry had little choice. But as he was riding along, he passed a man pulling a cart with his wife and children in tow. Henry stopped them quickly, hoping that he might have an answer.

“Excuse me,” Henry said, stopping them.

“Yes?” the man asked, looking him up and down with suspicion, as though Henry might be a robber or some such foul man.

“Forgive me, but is there not a fork in the road nearby? One leads to the town of Hartville and the other to a small cottage?” Henry asked.

The man’s brow twisted with confusion.

“Not that I know of, Sir. We live in Hartville and travel to London by this route nearly once each month. I know nothing of the path about which you speak,” the man said.

“B-but ... but I saw it,” Henry said, defending himself. “Just two days ago, I was on my way to Hartville, but I went to the left instead. There was a smaller road, and it led to a cottage.”

“Was it a road or just a path? There are certainly a few paths, but nothing that could be mistaken for a road. Most of the paths are used by hunters, searching for a bit of their game,” the man said with a shrug.

Henry wanted to argue with him, to tell the man that he knew what he was speaking about. He was not some madman who was making up tales for entertainment. He had come across the road, had got lost while travelling down it.

Surely a family who travelled this way to and from London so often would know what he meant. It was impossible that no one else had seen or been confused by the fork as Henry had.

Still, he could see that the family wasn't quite sure of him.

“If you do not know about the road, what of a young lady who makes instruments? She has light-coloured hair and brown eyes. Her face is freckled, and she plays the most ethereal music,” he said.

Two of the girls in the back, nearly young women themselves, began

to snicker at Henry's poetry. It was clear they thought him mad.

"Sounds to me like you were struck by fairy magic," the father said, rather patronizingly.

Henry was embarrassed as the other burst into laughter, but the man simply struck the reins and led the cart forward, leaving Henry to stand there, awkwardly, in his humiliation. He wished he could take back his words and get an answer from them, but they were clearly unwilling to help.

It was strange that these people did not know anything about the young woman. She lived so close to the town, and if they were making their way back to their home nearby, there was no reason they should not know who she was. It was strange to think that anyone would not know of such a young lady.

Whatever the explanation, he was sure that she had a reason for keeping to herself. More than likely, she just did not know this particular family. She must have friends of some sort and, although it was a small town, it was clear that not everyone knew one another.

Soon, however, he saw another young woman walking on her way towards the town. Stopping her, Henry decided to take another chance.

"Excuse me, Miss. May I trouble you for a moment?" he asked.

The young woman looked up at him with a stern expression in her eyes.

“D’pends on what it’s for,” she replied with a strong cockney accent.

“I wondered if you know anything of a young woman, probably around your age. She makes instruments. She has light hair and keeps to herself,” he said, trying to leave out anything that would signal his romantic interests.

“If the lass keeps to ’erself, ’ow do you fink I would know anyfing about ’er?” the girl asked, forcing Henry to strain to understand her words. He rarely had occasion to interact with women of her class and found the abrasive accent quite a struggle.

“Well, I know that Hartville is a small village, and I had hoped that you may know something of the young woman. Perhaps you might be a friend of hers, even,” he said.

“A friend? You’re ’aving a laugh, aren’t you? A lass like me ’asn’t got friends,” she said, scoffing and rushing off away from Henry.

Confused by her abrasive and rude demeanour, he was more bewildered than ever, wondering how many different kinds of people lived in Hartville. He had met a business associate with a noble family, the merchant family who had passed him just a little while before, and now this young woman who didn’t seem to have much of a handle on class or behaviour.

There was nothing consistent, and it was beginning to make Henry’s head spin.

Despite his better judgement, he decided to look just a little bit longer, riding further down the road and then turning back, travelling just as he had the first day when he stumbled upon the fork in the road. Surely he would find it somehow. There would be no way of missing it.

Henry repositioned himself in the saddle, shifting the pack that was crowding him, full of samples of smaller items for his father to look at and decide whether they were appropriate for the business to sell.

For the moment, Henry was bitter about the business, thinking it was an unnecessary waste of his time. He could have stayed closer to the cottage had he not been forced to go and meet with his father's associate, had he not had to try and maintain the business for his father's sake.

This, however, would be Henry's future, even with the title of earl added to his name. He would continue his father's legacy. He would do his best.

But he would find the young woman first.

Wherever she was, he would not stop searching until he discovered her. Of course, he was having terrible luck thus far, and he would probably have to come back again, but he had discovered a new reason to invest his time and energy in Hartville.

Henry was sure that his father would send him back again, which meant he would have more opportunities to seek out the young lady. Perhaps he could even ask his father to return on the pretence of speaking with the associate.

Berating himself for not asking for her name, Henry knew that his

searching would be so much easier if he had just thought to do so. As it was, he had been so enamoured by her, so caught up in the wonder of her, that he hadn't been thinking properly.

He had allowed himself to be distracted by her music and by her grace and her uniqueness. That much had simply caught him off guard, and now, he was forced to ask about her without even knowing how to go about it.

Again, he found himself confused. Who was she that she could so easily disappear? Who was she that no one knew who she was? The town of Hartville was small enough that someone had to know her. Didn't they?

As he thought about her strange, otherworldly music, Henry was starting to wonder if his mind played tricks on him. Had she been a dream? Was she a ghost?

He was not so foolish as to believe those things. And yet, he had no other explanation. None of this made any sense to him, and he was simply desperate to know more about her. He wanted to understand where this woman had come from and, more importantly, where she had gone. Still, he had no answers to those questions.

Whoever she was, and wherever she was, he no longer believed he would find her again. And if he could not find her again, he did not think he would ever find any other woman to match her.

Chapter 5

Nell still couldn't be sure what to think about her unexpected visitor. She wished to see him again but wasn't certain if she should tell Mary about him or not.

One thing of which she was certain was that Nell could never admit to her mother that she had spoken with a man without her mother present, particularly when that man had been so interested in Nell's instruments.

It had been three days since Nell had met the man, and her mother was cooking dinner while Nell entertained Daisy with a song.

"Nell, darling! The food is ready," her mother called.

She made her way inside to her mother and sat at the small, wooden table upon which they dined. Her mother appeared quite pleased by the preparation of potatoes, carrots, and cabbage. It smelled wonderful, and Nell was excited to eat.

"It looks excellent, Mother," Nell said.

"I am lucky to have such a grateful daughter. So many girls would complain about how they want meat and would shame their mothers for not providing," her mother muttered.

Nell had never thought to do such a thing. She and her mother had

meat once per month and on special days like Christmas and Nell's birthday. But her mother had lived a good deal more life than Nell ever had, and perhaps, her mother knew of complaints that Nell would never consider.

"Mother, you provide very well for us. You have never given me a reason to be unsatisfied with our life, and I am grateful for all your hard work to give me whatever I need most," Nell said, full of genuine gratitude.

"Well, perhaps I am simply aware of the fact that there is much I have kept you from, and I know that you would have every reason and right to be angry with me about that. I know that you must be sad you do not get to see more of the world, my dear. I am sure that you miss the opportunities that you do not have," her mother said, sadly.

It was surprising to Nell. Her mother never spoke aloud about these things. She preferred not to address the very real fact that Nell was unable to have any freedom or enjoy the things others might.

She hadn't even been sure if her mother was aware of just how much Nell had been refused. But with this sense of an apology, Nell felt overwhelmed that her mother finally acknowledged how she had kept Nell from the world outside.

"Because you have spoken of it, Mother, I have been wondering something lately ..." Nell began with hesitation.

Her mother looked at her with surrender, clearly having expected this day to come eventually.

“Yes, darling?” she asked.

“It is just that I do not understand why. Why is it that you keep me here so much of the time?”

The question was heavy in the air around them as quiet descended. Nell didn't know if her mother would even be willing to answer, but if she was, it was worth it to have the courage to ask this question. She wanted to know, more than anything, if she would ever have the freedom to go out.

Would her mother accept that Nell was a young woman now? Would she understand that Nell dreamt of life and a family of her own? Or was that too difficult to explain?

“My dear, I fear for your safety, and I fear for ... I just worry that you may come upon a man who will not be who he says he is,” her mother said.

“Do you mean Father?” Nell asked in confusion.

“Good heavens, of course not! I was not married to your father for long before he passed away, but he was a good man. If, however, I can protect you from the heartbreak of loss, I shall,” her mother said.

“But if there are good men in the world, why are you frightened for my safety? Could I not simply find a man like Father?” Nell asked.

Her mother chewed her lip before she answered.

“It is difficult to find a good man, and you are a beautiful young woman, Nell. I would not wish to risk you being found by a man with ill intent. That is why I have told you that I shall find the right husband for you eventually. But are you really in such a rush? I love having you here with me,” her mother said.

Nell sensed the sadness in her mother’s voice and knew that her mother feared loneliness as much as she feared Nell’s misfortune. It was tough to know what to say when her mother was overwhelmed by her own needs and hopes. Nell didn’t know what to do to make things right.

“And I enjoy being here with you as well, Mother,” she replied. “But I do still wish for a day when I may have what you have had. A husband. Children. All those things that make life more enjoyable.”

Her mother forked the food around on her plate, and Nell realised that, perhaps, she had said too much. The discussion clearly saddened Mother, and it might have been better if Nell had just remained silent about her hopes. She knew that her mother never meant to push her into this box, but that did not mean the box was not there.

“Yes, Nell. Marriage and children are good things. I do, truly, wish them for you. But one has to be patient sometimes. I will do what I can to make you happy, to satisfy your need for them. But I must also be diligent in protecting you from those who may harm you,” she said.

“Who would harm me, Mother? Who is it that you fear?” Nell asked.

“You know what I said about you not complaining? That is because you are a good girl and you have never seen all those things worthy of your complaints. But I work in the town, Nell. I listen to the nobles gossiping about one another, backbiting, shaming each other.

I see how the men treat the young women in town, particularly those who have no station of their own. Those are the girls who fall for the charms of the nobles,” her mother began.

“The girls flutter their lashes at a lord who passes them by. Before you know it, the girl’s reputation is ruined. She cannot find a decent husband because of her interactions with the lord. He will use her and discard her. She will be nothing,” Nell’s mother said, the bitterness in her voice fierce and angry.

Nell wondered if something had happened to a girl in town recently. Why was this such a concern for her mother? Had a young woman come to be with child? What might cause her mother to be so angry?

“Anyway, there is no reason for us to discuss the matter further. You know what I have said about the nobles. They are the worst rubbish of society, and we would all be far better off without them. Now, eat your supper and let us speak of it no longer,” her mother said.

Nell wanted to push the conversation further but realised it would be futile. Her mother didn’t wish to share anything more, and that was enough for Nell to know the conversation was over.

She recalled a time, perhaps four or five months ago, when her mother had said that all noblemen were liars, that they were all bad men. Nell had asked if it was all men or nobles only, and her mother

had simply appeared nervous, as though she hated the idea of Nell asking about men at all.

But the conversation had already moved away from the topic, leaving Nell painfully disappointed that nothing more could be said about what Mother warned her against.

“Tell me, how are your instruments? What else is in your mind to create?” her mother asked, smiling as if nothing had happened just moments before.

Nell swallowed a bite of her potatoes and took a drink before answering.

“I wanted to spend some time practicing the Bower before I make anything else. But I have decided that next week I shall begin making more of what I have already designed. I thought that, given how well the instruments have come out thus far, I might see if I can reproduce them,” she said.

“Oh? Do you need two of each?” her mother asked.

Nell paused, considering her words delicately.

“Actually, I thought it might be a benefit to us if I can make enough to sell,” she said.

Her mother was quiet and stared at her with trepidation.

“Oh? Well ... that is a very nice thing you have thought of, Nell. I am not sure where you intend to sell them, but I suppose it would do you no harm to try and recreate them,” she said in an attempt to support Nell.

“I know that you do not want me in town on my own, but I thought I might be able to sell them on Saturdays when you are usually home. We might be able to go out together and see if anyone would like to buy them,” Nell said.

“And if they get stolen?” her mother challenged.

“Then I shall make another,” Nell answered, unable to keep the frustration from her voice.

“Who will teach them how to play? Are you intending to become a tutor as well?” her mother asked.

“If you would allow it ...” Nell said under her breath.

Her mother set the knife and fork on the plate and tucked her hands in her lap.

“I suppose you have given me much to think about, Nell. I am not sure if this is a wise idea, but I shall consider it if it is what you want. For now, we ought to simply eat our dinner, and then you may play your music for me, hmm?”

It was, yet again, a conclusion to a conversation that Nell wished to have. But she knew her mother well enough to understand that the discussion really was terminated. It was time to move on.

“Very well, Mother,” Nell said.

They finished the rest of their meal in silence, and Nell sensed she was not the only one feeling bitter at that moment. Her mother was evidently quite bothered by Nell’s desire to know other people and wander beyond home’s walls. Still, Nell could not help herself. How could she live all her days cooped up like this?

Once they had finished eating, Nell cleaned up the small kitchen and swept the floor. She then went outside to play music for Daisy, who immediately flew to her and perched on the window ledge nearest Nell.

“Tell me what you think, Daisy. I, for one, hope that this Bower really is the next grand instrument in England. After all, there was a day when the pianoforte was invented, the harpsichord before that, and then the harp, the lyre, and the lute. All of these were made and are now grand and famous, making melody throughout the world.

Nell wanted to be counted amongst those who had invented grand things. And at that moment, she realised that her ambitions really were beyond this cottage. She didn’t simply want to perform. She wanted to be known. She wanted to walk into a concert hall and see one of her instruments played from the stage.

She wanted the children of nobility to take lessons and become masters at the Belute and the Rollam and the Herweyn and Morella. All of these crafts that she had pieced together were something she was deeply proud of. And although Nell had no way of knowing whether others would be as impressed as the man had been, she was curious to find out.

She wished that Mary would come by, but she did not expect to see her friend for at least a few more days. Nell realised that she needed her mother to accept Mary if she would ever accept anyone else in Nell's life. The time truly had come for Nell to take a stand and insist upon a life in which she had some sort of independence. And if her mother refused to allow it, Nell needed to be brave enough to take it for herself.

"I have had enough of this, Daisy," Nell whispered to the bird. "There must be a day in a woman's life when she decides that she will be her own woman. I am not sure if I can be strong enough, but I shall have to try."

I cannot continue like this, not when my heart longs so desperately to be out there in the world. There must be a day when things get better. Do you not think the time has come for me?"

The little bird tilted its head, and she hopped closer to Nell. It would simply not do for Nell to have only a bird for a companion.

Her life was just beginning, and she wanted to see where it would lead.

Chapter 6

Lord Daniel Walden, the Earl of Comran, was more than just Henry's dearest friend. He was a confidant and the closest thing Henry could imagine to having a brother. Daniel made him feel as though he had something of a family, even though Daniel's father had passed away many years before, and Henry's father did not entirely approve of the man.

Henry's father had always complained that Daniel was too soft and gentle, too hopeful and not positive enough. He was not a strong, commanding figure. He was amiable and thoughtful.

Henry found these traits to be wonderful, knowing that Daniel was as loyal as a friend could ever be. He hoped his own character might grow to be more like Daniel's, even if Henry's father disapproved.

But as the two walked through the city and made their way to a small coffee shop, Daniel started asking Henry about his trip and his time in Hartville.

"It is rather a small town, is it not? Were you terribly bored, or did you find something there to entertain you?" Daniel asked.

Henry smiled, knowing that Daniel was the one person with whom he could speak honestly about the young woman he had met and everything that had transpired during his time in Hartville.

"I wish I knew what to say about it all, Daniel. Honestly, my heart is confused. As is my mind," Henry began.

“What do you mean by that? How so?”

“On my way to town, I got lost. Of course, I did not tell my father about this, for he would be furious. Nevertheless, I managed to find myself in the middle of a grove of trees, and there was a small cottage from which I heard the most astonishing music. It was strange, something I had never heard before. There was a softness, yet a sadness in it. You cannot imagine what it was like,” he said.

Daniel looked at him curiously as the coffee was brought.

“I do not understand. Where did the music come from?” Daniel asked.

“That was what I wished to discover. So I made my way to the cottage and found a young woman there, who makes the most peculiar instruments. She has quite a talent. It was remarkable listening to what she had crafted.

She writes music as well, and I think what she has invented could be a lovely addition to any home in London. It was all very forward-thinking and certainly quite fashionable,” Henry said.

Daniel grinned and waited. Henry wanted to at least make an effort to push the idea of this as a business objective. He trusted Daniel, but he did not yet want to admit that he was painfully interested in the young woman and knowing more about her.

Instead, it was better to bear in mind that his father had sent him on business, which was the primary purpose of his trip to the town. The last thing he needed was to confess to his dearest friend that he was actually spending all his time thinking about a strange young woman he would most likely never see again.

But Daniel's expression painted a clear picture of reality. He knew Henry well enough, and Henry expected the questions to come at any moment. No matter how hard he might try to pretend otherwise, his heart was already longing to go back to that young woman, and if he had been able to find her again, he might never have been willing to leave.

"So, is there anything more you wish to tell me about this young woman who created striking instruments?" Daniel asked, tilting his head and taking another sip of his coffee.

Henry still had not touched his. He was, somehow, quite nervous about this conversation. It felt as though voicing the news about this young woman would break the spell of the moment they had together.

"I was thinking I could see if they are worthy of the reproduction, these instruments. My father might have an interest in carrying them as a new product to sell. After all, what are we to sell when every fashionable home in London already has enough furniture?" Henry asked with a nervous laugh.

"Is that so? You wish to expand the items which you sell? And have you asked your father about this yet? Did you mention that they are made by a young woman you stumbled upon in the woods?" Daniel teased.

Henry brushed it off for a moment before shrugging a confession.

“So you have not told your father. I understand. I am sure that he would be furious that you even entertained a conversation with a young lady who is not of noble birth. Still, if you are interested in learning more about her, you must do so. Tell me, do you think she just might be a young woman you would wish to pursue?” Daniel asked.

“Oh, hush. You know that I could never pursue a courtship with a young woman like her. First of all, I do not even know her name. Second, my father would never allow it. It would be foolishness even to try.

Whatever silly thoughts I may have had running through my mind, I understand that I would not be allowed such an interest. I could never be afforded that freedom,” Henry said.

“That is certainly true. And your father would be angry with me for knowing about it and not sending you directly to him with your confession. Anyway, just because your father feels this way does not mean that you must give up everything in your life. How many times have you gone to see her?”

“I met her only the one time. I searched for her again, but I could not find her. It was very distressing, having gone out of my way to try and find her once more and to ask others about her, but only to have them all look at me as though I am a crazy fool with no sense about him,” Henry said.

“What is her name?” Daniel asked.

“That is a part of the problem. I was so intrigued by her that I did not even think to ask. Can you believe it? I feel as if I missed the most important thing imaginable, but my mind was not working properly.

I was so caught up in learning other things about her and listening to her songs that I did not even stop to ask her such an important thing,” he admitted.

Daniel shook his head and gave an incredulous laugh.

“Yes, you missed something deeply important. But perhaps not all is lost. Surely we may work together to find her. If you want to find her badly enough, you may yet have hope.

I am more than happy to give you aid, so long as I can trust that you are going to do the right thing and be a gentleman who is willing to express to her that you are a nobleman and that you understand your limitations, but you would like to court her,” Daniel said with a matter-of-fact attitude.

“And how am I meant to simply arrive at her home and ask to court her when I would never be allowed to pursue marriage?” Henry scoffed.

“By first asking yourself if marriage with her is even something you want,” Daniel replied.

Henry thought about it for a moment. How could he be thinking about marriage right now? He had spent no more than an hour with the young woman, and he knew nothing about her other than her

penchant for music and her strange demeanour.

There was nothing else about her that he could really get a sense of. So why would he allow his heart to do what it was doing now? Why would he give himself permission to beg for her and dream of her?

There were so many reasons he needed to forget about the young woman in the cottage. He needed to forget the lure of her song. She was a siren, calling him to shore, and his boat would surely crash upon the rocks if he allowed her to draw him in. He could lose everything.

And yet, something about her song made him question that it could even be worth it.

“I am willing to help you if you so choose,” Daniel said again.

“Truly? You would be willing to put aside your own interests to aid me in this foolish quest?”

“I would. But you know as well as I do that you had best tread carefully. Although he would need to learn the truth in time, your father could not find out about this before you are ready. He would never forgive you for pursuing a young woman of inferior birth. He would sooner disown you than see you ruin his reputation,” Daniel said.

“I know. And that pains me to remember, but it is true. I know that we cannot take the risk that he may discover what we are doing and for whom we are searching, but I am ever so grateful if you are willing to aid me in this effort.

I would like to find her again, for whatever reason that may be. Even if I am an utter fool for having an interest in this young woman, I simply cannot help it," Henry said.

He still wondered what had come over him as he was suddenly so deeply entrenched in this desire to find her again. Once more, he thought about the joy on his mother's face when he saw her play the harp.

It was so similar to the joy on the young woman's face as she played her own instruments. And perhaps the recognition of that, the way she reminded him of his mother, was enough. Perhaps that was the only thing Henry needed to answer why he was curious about her.

His father had always been an angry, bitter man. He had never been kind or gentle. He was never fond of anyone, and he had been harsh with Henry as he grew up. To have a reminder of the sweetness of his mother was more than enough to make Henry long for this music.

He wanted to remember what it was like to have a happy, youthful woman who would care for him, who would remind him of the beautiful parts of the world. If his father could not do that, perhaps this young woman would.

In just a matter of days, he felt as though the world had grown more beautiful, and that was due, in part, to her music. The rest was entirely being around her. The simple, grey dress she had worn was so different from the daughters of nobility he would dance with at balls.

Lady Daphne would always wear a string of pearls that dipped with a golden 'D' in the centre, reminding him of the notorious necklace worn by Lady Anne Boleyn, who had sent London into upheaval centuries before.

Lady Grace was known for her chattiness and the fact that she wore far too much scent, which would overpower the ballroom at times and could even send a man sneezing away from her.

But the young woman in the cottage needed none of those accoutrements. She was simply a lovely woman in her own right. Her smile, her freckled cheeks without the rouge, her lack of jewels and adornments, all of it was a sign that she needed nothing that other women required. She was pure and lovely, just as she was.

So if Henry really did want to seek her out, he wanted to be worthy of her. And if that meant hiding everything from his father, so be it.

Chapter 7

When Mary finally came around to the cottage, Nell was thrilled to see her. She wanted to talk to her about the excitement that had occurred earlier that week, and since Nell's mother was gone, Nell did not have to worry about being overheard.

"Mary, come quickly and sit beside me," Nell said eagerly.

"Goodness, I have never seen you grin so much. What is it? What has happened? Is your mother going to let you roam freely?" Mary asked.

Nells scoffed and shook her head, but she did not allow this to dampen her mood.

"No, not at all. Actually, when my mother was not here, something happened. A gentleman happened by. A real, true gentleman. He was so kind. He was lost and searching for the town and happened by here instead. Oh, Mary, I wish I could tell you just how lovely he was, but I am at a loss for words. I am so overcome!" she declared.

Mary was quiet, seeming to take in this news before answering.

"What is it? Are you upset? Have I done something wrong? Do you think it was a mistake for me to speak with him?" Nell asked.

"Oh, hush, Nell. You know that I would never say it was a mistake. I am simply surprised. I cannot believe that you actually had a chance

to speak with a man. Your mother has worked so hard to prevent it that a part of me thought you might never find a way. But, alas! If it has happened, you must be full of excitement,” Mary said.

“I am, indeed. I am shocked, of course, but that is just a small part of it. I know that my mother will not be pleased if I tell her, and because of that, I have remained silent these past five days. But still, I keep waiting to see him again. He said that he might come by again,” Nell said, trying to temper herself rather than simply allowing everything to come spilling out.

“He intends to see you again? Honestly? Goodness, that is rather quick of him. Did you want him to stay away when your mother is home?” Mary asked.

Nell shook her head, knowing it had been a mistake not to.

“I was very distracted by him, and I shared nothing about my mother. And I know that if he comes when she is here, she will be angry with me for not telling her that he came the first time. But what am I to do? He was so lovely, Mary,” Nell said.

Mary laughed.

“Eleanor, dear, of course, you think he is lovely. You have never met another man. Any man would be lovely to your eyes because you know none. I imagine he was covered in animal skins, and his hair was a mat?” Mary teased.

Nell pursed her lips and gave Mary a playful swat.

“He was no such beast. He was a gentleman. Honestly. He wore a fine suit and had a silk cravat. His shoes were a smooth leather that we could never afford. Honestly, I was deeply impressed not only with his handsome face and his striking charisma but also by his cleanliness and orderly appearance,” Nell said in defence.

Mary gave Nell a thoughtful look, clearly taking her a bit more seriously now.

“So he was a gentleman. Does that mean he was a nobleman?” Mary asked.

Nell swallowed the lump in her throat, and her heart sped up. She had been wondering about that but hadn’t wanted to face the question. If he were a nobleman, it would only give her mother even more of a reason to disapprove of him.

And if he were not a nobleman, then at least Nell would be able to find a way to convince her mother to meet him and decide whether Nell would be allowed to converse with him further.

But Nell understood that even then, it would be a challenge. And if he was not noble, he was clearly a man of great wealth. Something about that left her feeling uneasy, as though it was only more of a reason to be wary of him. Her mother had warned her about men like that, men who had money or power. They were all liars, she had said. They were not good men.

But he had certainly seemed good. It made no sense to think he was a bad man when he had done nothing to give Nell that impression. Just because she had not met a man before did not make her naive. She had read books; she had heard stories. Mary had certainly told her

about gossip in town and had given her the society pages to see what was happening in London.

In truth, Nell had known much more about men than her mother thought or wished. That was a fact that Nell preferred to keep secret. She didn't want Mother to stop trusting her just because Nell knew something of the world.

But the man had not shown any of the signs her mother warned against. So why should she be frightened? Why should she think he was a bad man?

"I cannot say whether or not he was noble," Nell finally answered.

"Or are you simply frightened by the answer?" Mary challenged.

Nell sighed.

"I suppose you are right. He had the bearing of a wealthy man, of a titled man. Whether he is noble or not, he certainly possesses a great means. That much was clear," Nell said.

"Or, he had just robbed a wealthy man. That could be the answer. And then your mother would be perfectly fine with your interest in him because it would mean that he detests nobility," Mary teased, laughing at her own joke.

But Nell could not find amusement in it. She wanted to know the truth rather than speculate several possibilities. Whoever the man was, Nell

just wanted to know him and know if he was truly good or if he was something she ought to forget. It was torture, just thinking about him and wondering if he would ever come back and see her again.

“I am sorry. I should not tease you about it, but I do fear that you will be stuck here forever or that your mother will not allow you to marry a decent man because she is frightened, Nell. Just do not forget that you have choices you can make if the time ever comes,” Mary said.

“But what does that mean? You have told me that not all men are bad, and my mother has said that the noble ones are. Meanwhile, I know only what you have each told me and what I have read on pages.

I pride myself on knowing more than my mother thinks I do, but here I am, confused as ever now that I have met a man for the first time,” Nell said.

Mary shook her head in frustration.

“It is wrong, Nell. It is wrong that you are kept here like this. You are a young woman, and you have never been allowed to converse with a man, not even in town with your mother. Do you not see that she is holding you captive?” Mary asked.

It was painful, and Nell had thought about it often enough, but she also knew that her mother meant no harm, and it was too difficult to be bitter against her mother for simply trying to protect her.

“Nell, do you think your mother is right for keeping you here?” Mary asked further.

"I think Mother is terribly worried about what might happen to me. Is it not every mother's desire to keep her children safe? I know that it is harsh, the way she is. But what you must know about her is that it is not done out of spite. She is very good to me; she just worries too much," Nell said, choosing to have grace towards her parent.

"Even if her heart is good and true and kind, it does not give her an excuse to deprive you of happiness. I wish that you could see the freedoms you miss by allowing her to keep you like this," Mary said.

"And I wish you could see that she only needs a bit more coaxing to let me out of this cage," Nell replied.

Mary appeared to give up in her efforts to help Nell see the truth. Although Nell understood Mary's concern, she didn't want to face it. She didn't want to admit that she needed to be firm with her mother, that she needed to be bold. After determining the other evening that she would try, she still acknowledged that it would have to happen in steps.

She would try to push her mother week by week, rather than simply demanding to go to town on her own and insisting to see men without her mother present. For now, she only needed Mother to accept that Mary was not a poor influence on Nell.

"I am working on it, Mary. I am, slowly but surely, convincing her of the life I long for. But what I cannot yet ask her is this," she said. "What do you think of the dangers of men? You have told me they are not all bad but are there reasons to be wary?"

“Of course there are, Nell. One must be cautious of those with whom one spends her time. Your gentleman could be as idyllic as you claim. Or he could be very manipulative. You must be careful, but that does not mean you must be frightened,” Mary said.

Nell didn't want to be naive or foolish, but she also wanted to take the chance of getting to know the man if he came around again. With Mary's words in her head, she was beginning to feel a bit more confident that this would be just fine, that she was going to learn what boundaries must be placed and what she may allow herself.

As long as the gentleman wasn't noble, she figured she could get her mother to come around in time. As for the rest, Nell just hoped she could find the balance between freedom from her mother and the motherly love that had got her this far.

Chapter 8

“Henry, I must speak with you right away,” Daniel said, bursting into the study. He immediately pulled back when he realised Henry was with his father.

Henry took a deep breath, glancing at the look of disapproval on his father’s face, those harsh eyes directed at Daniel.

“And what is the meaning of this?” he asked in a low rumble.

“Oh, forgive me, Lord Rosewell. I beg your pardon. I was not aware that you were in here,” Daniel apologised.

“And why should I not be in here? This is my study, is it not? You think I have handed it over to my son for his misuse? I am not dead yet, Lord Comran. You need not come barging in here, insisting to speak with my son and paying no regard for propriety. Did the housekeeper not urge you to wait until she had introduced you formally?” Henry’s father asked.

“Father, please,” Henry said calmly. “It is my own fault. I have given Daniel freedom to come in as he wishes. I did so when you were away in Brighton, and I was not worried that you might be inconvenienced. I am sure that Daniel, knowing you have now returned, will not seek to offend you by repeating this incident.”

Although Henry’s tone gave a warning to Daniel, he knew that his friend understood. Henry had no qualms with Daniel’s actions, but this was the best way to prevent his father from being angry. Henry

would rather take that wrath upon himself than have it visited upon his friend.

“In the future, do consider that I might not want our meetings interrupted,” Henry’s father grumbled.

“Yes, Father. Of course. May I be excused for a moment to speak with Daniel?” he asked.

“Be gone. We have finished up here anyway,” he replied with a flick of the wrist.

Henry quickly departed the room with Daniel, and they made their way outside, where they were less likely to be overheard by Henry’s father or any of the household staff.

“I did not mean to get you into any trouble,” Daniel apologised.

“Hush. You did nothing wrong. You know what my father is like. Now, what is it? You seemed excited. What has happened?” Henry asked, hoping Daniel had some wonderful news to share.

“I may have found her, Henry. I may have found the young woman,” Daniel said with joy.

Henry froze in place, not believing his ears. Was it possible? Had Daniel really found the young woman in the cottage?

“What do you mean? How? Did you travel to Hartville? Did you take the path to the left?” Henry asked.

“No, nothing like that. Rather, I have a friend who lived in Hartville. I sent a letter to him and asked if he knew anything about a young woman who makes instruments and remains isolated.

He wrote back to me, saying that his cousin is friends with a young woman who never comes out except once every few months and only with her mother,” Daniel said.

Henry was excited, but he was also deeply bothered to hear about the young woman’s circumstances and the lack of interaction she must have.

“He said that his cousin befriended the young woman when she was bitten by a squirrel while walking through the woods. The young woman not only made a salve to prevent infection in his cousin, but she also discovered that the squirrel was sick and had bitten out of some illness.

She nursed the beast back to health and set it free,” Daniel said with a laugh, shaking his head.

Henry smiled, thinking of the sparrow that seemed so intrigued by the young woman.

“Can you imagine? She cured the beast and the young woman the beast attacked? What sort of person tries to save a squirrel like that?” Daniel scoffed.

“Only a peculiar young woman,” Henry said with affection.

“Goodness, you truly are wooed by her, are you not? I cannot imagine what would possess you to think highly of her, given this information,” Daniel said with a laugh.

“You did not meet her, so you would not understand,” Henry replied.

“No, but I should like to. And I know that you wish to again. Because of this, I have already written back to the baron and told him that we shall be there by tomorrow—if you are unable to leave right away and get there by nightfall, that is—and I am sure that he will introduce us to his cousin who will help us find your musician,” Daniel explained.

Henry was shocked. He had begun doubting himself, thinking that he had simply gone mad and dreamt the most perfect woman rather than truly meeting her. It was a wonder that he would be able to see her again, to see that she really did exist.

“Thank you, Daniel. I am so grateful. The idea of seeing her again is more than I can rightly contain. To think that I will hear her music again? That gives me a great deal of hope.

Now, allow me a moment to speak with my father and see if I may leave for a few days. He will be curious, so I shall tell him that you and I are going on a trip to visit your friend. That is all he needs to know,” Henry said.

“Certainly. You speak with him, and I shall wait here for you. I have no desire to confront him again,” Daniel said.

With that, Henry did as discussed and spoke with his father, who harrumphed his way through most of the conversation.

“And you will be doing business?” he asked.

“We are going to see a friend of Daniel’s. However, as we shall be near Hartville, I am more than happy to stop by Mr. Sumner’s factory with your notes, and I may have some time to sit down with him and share the ideas you had to improve the small, decorative chests,” Henry said, hoping to appeal to his father’s sense of work as a means of getting to leave.

“Yes, and tell him that I was not satisfied with the table he crafted for Lord Merriweather either. One leg was a hairsbreadth too short, and it was enough to send a roll toppling over,” he replied.

With everything settled, Henry quickly threw a change of clothes into a pack and met Daniel outside.

“I am ready. Shall we go at once?” Henry asked.

“Of course. And once we are there, you will have the chance to find your young woman, and all that you hope for may come to pass. And if it does not come to pass, at least you will know for certain. This is the best chance you have to find out,” Daniel said.

He was right and, although Henry was anxious, he was also desperate. If he could find her, he would be able to learn her name. He would hear her voice. He would listen to her music. And he would see if she really was someone he might fall in love with. If she were, his father’s disapproval would be enough to ruin Henry forever.

Henry woke at the inn in the morning, immediately recalling their late arrival in Hartville the night before.

Henry had been a fool and insisted they try to find where the road split and see if he could discover the cottage again without help. Despite Daniel's gentle protestations, Henry would not stop searching until they were exhausted and still a thirty-minute ride from the inn.

By the time they arrived, the cook was in bed, the brandy had been drained, and there was nothing for them to do but crash upon their beds and sleep until morning.

But it was now time to get up and eat a hearty breakfast before finding the baron. When Henry made his way to the dining room, he saw that Daniel was already there, laughing with another man.

"Ah, there is he is. Lord Throllings, this is Lord Collins, the future Earl of Rosewell," Daniel said.

"Yes, yes. How nice to meet you," Lord Throllings said, shaking Henry's hand excitedly. "I hear that you wish to know more about my cousin's friend?"

"Yes, I do," Henry admitted. "I am considering whether to produce her instruments on a grander scale for the sake of the business I run with my father. I am certain that many people throughout England would enjoy hearing her music, and I would be delighted to make it accessible to them," Henry said.

“Of course, of course. I have heard all about her music and how phenomenal she is. My cousin has shared with me that she is some sort of master of the musical arts. Now, I have not yet told her that you are in town, but I did share that a friend of mine was asking about her strange little friend.

She was very nervous, but we shall go to her now, and we may ask for her assistance in this matter, hmm? Does that sound agreeable?”

Henry nodded with enthusiasm, desperate to find the young woman again. As they followed the Baron of Throllings through the town, Henry saw Mr. Sumner’s factory and reminded himself to stop there later in the day when he had a chance.

“Are you sure you do not wish to stop now?” Daniel asked, leaning over as if reading Henry’s mind.

Henry grimaced, but Daniel decided for them, urging Henry to get his business over and done with. He reminded him that it would be better if he hurried now than putting it off for later when he was overwhelmed by the excitement of seeing the young woman again.

As soon as Henry had completed the mission for his father, they were back on their way to the baron’s cousin. They arrived at her home soon enough, and she was outside in the garden.

“Mary,” Lord Throllings called to her as he dismounted.

“Michael, what are you doing here? Does Mother know you have

come for a visit? And who are your friends?” Mary asked, looking at Henry for only a flash before her eyes landed on Daniel.

“Mary, this is Lord Comran and Lord Collins. Now, Lord Collins here is looking for a young woman he met before. The one I told you about, remember? He is seeking your little friend who makes the instruments and is always alone?” Lord Throllings said.

Mary sighed and shook her head.

“I am not sure this is a good idea. You wish me to simply take you to her?” she asked Henry.

He stuttered for a moment before answering.

“Well, I cannot see why not. I saw her once before, but I can no longer find her home. Is there a problem?” he asked.

“Why do you wish to find her again?” she quizzed.

“I have no improper intentions. I am interested in making more of her instruments,” Henry said statically. He knew that his tone was less than convincing, but it was all he could say.

“Is that so? For what purpose?” she asked.

“I own a business with my father, and Lord Comran is an investor as well. I think her instruments could be very important in this nation’s music. So, you see, I would like to find her because we discussed this

before, and now I wish to see if we may find an agreement with which we are all happy,” he said. “That is all I wish to do. I wish to ensure that she has what she needs.”

In some ways, it was the truth. He did wish her to have what she needed. What he didn’t want was to deal with the instruments and then walk away from the woman herself. But as he needed to convince this woman’s friend of his intentions, it was far easier to share the most noble ones before allowing her to see that the young woman had struck him.

“Very well. But you must be careful. This is not as simple as you seem to think it is,” Mary said, much to Henry’s confusion.

“What do you mean by that?”

“It is unimportant. Just remember my warning. There are reasons she is out there in the woods on her own. It is not her desire but the desire of another. Anyway, you shall simply have to find out for yourself. Now, if you wish to come along, you had best hurry. She will not be alone for long,” Mary said.

Henry assumed she meant something in regards to the young woman’s mother. After all, who else could be out there? Was not her mother the only person she had mentioned?

Although Mary gave no further explanation, she led them to the outskirts of town and down a subtle, poorly lined path. Henry was confused, not having seen this path before.

“Where are we? I thought there was a fork in the road coming from London, but no one knew what I was speaking of,” Henry said.

Mary turned to him and shrugged.

“As I said, there is a reason she is out there alone. The road leading to the cottage is not always visible, and when you came, the undergrowth must have been trodden down. But this is another path, and we shall arrive soon,” Mary said.

Henry had the strangest sensation rolling in his stomach, as though there was something strange going on, something he didn’t want to admit. Nevertheless, he followed. After all, he had come this far in pursuit of the young woman, and he was about to find her.

Indeed, he was nearly in the place he had eagerly hoped for. And nothing else mattered anymore.

Chapter 9

Nell had barely finished hollowing out the bell on the Belute she was recreating when she heard footsteps headed her way. Knowing that her mother would still be working for a few more hours, she was not surprised to see Mary coming closer.

But seeing two men alongside Mary, including the one she had met days before, Nell dropped the Belute and immediately gasped, scrambling to pick it up again.

“Nell, darling, these two gentlemen were looking for you,” Mary said, rushing over to Nell while the other two stayed a short distance away.

“Y-you brought them here,” Nell asked with panic. She had wanted to see the man again, but it was strange that Mary had been the one to help them find her. And who was the second man?

“They found out that I know you because of my cousin. I know that it is a shock, but the gentleman with the dark hair said he met you, and I assume he is the one you told me about?” Mary asked.

“He is, indeed,” Nell confirmed.

Mary let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness. I was afraid you might have an interest in the other man, and I certainly hope that you do not,” Mary said, smirking and glancing at the other gentleman.

But Nell was not amused. She was uncomfortable and uncertain as to what she needed to do now. She had not been prepared for it to turn out like this.

“What am I meant to do, Mary?” she asked.

“Allow me to properly introduce you, and then you may speak with them,” Mary replied.

“Do they really want to make more of my instruments?”

“That is what Lord Collins said. He is the one you met already. And yes, he is obviously a nobleman,” Mary said dryly. “I think he likes you, but they are claiming that it is just a matter of wanting to sell your instruments.”

Nell had no idea what to do now. If he were any sort of nobleman, she was in trouble. Still, Nell hoped that he was simply a baron, like Mary’s cousin. If the men were friends, that would make sense. And a baron was not so bad, was it? It was not like being a duke, after all.

“Very well. I suppose I ought to meet them,” Nell said.

Mary led her to the two men and stood straight, clearly trying to flatter her figure in front of the other man.

“Miss Eleanor Hawkins, this is Lord Collins and Lord Comran,” Mary said.

“Miss Hawkins, it is very nice to meet you,” Lord Collins said.

“And you, Lord Collins,” she replied.

“Yes, Miss Hawkins, it is nice to meet you,” Lord Comran echoed. “If you do not mind, I think I should like to see some of our instruments while you speak with Lord Collins about the business and expectations.”

With that, Lord Comran and Mary made their way towards the instruments on the rocks, leaving Nell and Lord Collins alone on the path.

“Y-yes, I should like to speak with you again if you do not mind,” he said.

“Of course, Lord Collins. What is it that you wish to know? You want to make and sell them?” she asked.

“Well, before we discuss that, I simply wish to know more about you. A man is only as good as his business associates, after all,” he said with an awkward laugh. Nell couldn’t help smiling at that.

“Yes, I suppose,” she replied.

“Aside from music, is there anything you enjoy?” he asked.

Nell was surprised by this question. It really was far more personal than she had expected. If he wanted to know things completely unrelated to her musical abilities, she wondered if this was some sort of interview.

“I do,” she replied. “I enjoy reading, and I enjoy anything with animals.”

He smiled and nodded, amused by something, although Nell could not be sure what it was.

“I confess that I heard a tale in which you rescued a squirrel from its own disease?” he asked.

Nell laughed, aware that it was strange to most people.

“I did. And I refrained from becoming ill, and I also prevented Mary from becoming ill. I know that many people may think I was a fool who put herself at risk in trying to save the squirrel, but I could not help myself. It was simple enough to look after him,” she said.

“I think it is remarkable. It takes a very special woman to care about all creatures like that,” he said.

“And you, Lord Collins? I know you like your business, and you like my instruments, but what more should I know about a potential associate?” Nell asked, moving on from his compliment before he could see her blush.

“I enjoy reading as well,” he answered. “And I enjoy attending balls so long as I am not forced to dance with a woman with whom I do not

wish to dance. I appreciate art and the skill of the masters. And I do love sports and being very active.”

“Those are all wonderful things,” Nell said.

“Yes, I think so,” he replied.

“And do you have a family?” she asked, trying to decide how she could get answers on his status in society. He had mentioned his father once but without any real detail. If his father were still alive, it was a good chance that Lord Collins might not have a formal title yet.

If Collins was, indeed, his surname, it meant that he was the heir of nobility rather than nobility himself. That was a small loophole, but it was one she could cling to if necessary.

“As I said before, my mother passed away, but I live with my father. He and I run the business together. I am very different from him,” he said, drawing out the last part slowly. It was clear to Nell that Lord Collins found it difficult to speak of his father, just as she found it difficult to speak of her mother.

“I see. I am different from my mother as well, but I suppose it is not quite the same,” she said.

“Why is that?” he asked.

“Because we are different in that she wishes to keep me safe at all

times, and I have a desire to leave this cottage for an entire day on my own if I wish," she said with a pitiful laugh.

He looked her directly in the eye as they stood there, each shifting in uncomfortable poses, clearly uncertain about the impression they were giving one another. Nell wished that she could be more confident but then remembered that this was only the second time she had spoken with a man, and she could be proud of how well she was doing and the fact that she had not been too terrified to speak.

She wanted to know more about him still. He seemed very kind. Not like the things her mother had said or the ways in which she described men. This gentleman was much more like the heroes in the books she often read.

Perhaps she was too hopeful, but that was certainly how Nell felt as she spoke with him. He was sweet and gentle, sensitive towards her discomfort. He was not pushing her in any way but patient.

He was precisely the sort of man a woman like her needed if he would be the first man with whom she interacted.

Nell glanced over towards Mary and Lord Comran. They were laughing, perfectly at ease with one another, smiling and chatting away. That was the confidence Nell wished to have, but she understood that it would be a very long time before she found it. She would need to be stronger before that day might come.

"It would seem that our friends are getting along quite well," Lord Collins observed with a smile of his own.

"Indeed, it does. I was just thinking that. But Mary is a very vibrant

person. She is my dearest friend, and I have never known anyone quite like her,” Nell said, hoping to cover the fact that Mary was the only friend she’d ever had aside from her mother and animals.

Maintaining an appearance of normalcy was very important to Nell at that moment. She was not as shy as she had been the first time she met Lord Collins, but she didn’t want to give herself a chance to fall back into that. Instead, she wanted to be bold and brave as she had been telling herself so often of late.

“Daniel is a very loyal friend. I hope you will have a chance to speak with him and see what a good man he is. If he has an interest in your friend, as I suspect he might, it would be good for you to know what he is like as well,” Lord Collins said.

Nell agreed, but she also wanted the same for herself. If Mary could see what kind of man Lord Collins was, perhaps she could help Nell in understanding what she ought to do next and whether this was a good idea. It was a way of finding the truth underneath the murkiness of this new world in which Nell could truly interact with gentlemen.

“I suppose you are right. Have you any further questions for me about the business, or shall I show your friend that he is holding the Tuumbra upside down?” Nell asked.

“I suppose you ought to show him,” Lord Collins replied with a chuckle.

Nell made her way over, trying to walk as confidently as she was able. She gently took the Tuumbra from Lord Comran and turned it right side up.

“There you are. Now you should be able to try it properly. It is far easier to play an instrument when it is not upside down,” Nell said, hoping not to embarrass him.

“Thank goodness, for I was beginning to fear that I was simply a madman, incapable of understanding anything in regards to music,” he said.

Mary giggled and leaned into Nell. They stood for a moment as the two men examined the instruments, but it was the moments when the men looked up at each of them that Nell and Mary glanced at one another with hope in their eyes.

“Well, I believe I shall have to hear you play each of these as I think about what might be a good addition to our sales,” Lord Collins said.

Something in his tone whenever he mentioned selling the instruments left Nell wondering if he was making it all up. He said it so stiffly, almost as if he was not a businessman at all. And while she suspected that he was not lying about owning a business, she couldn’t imagine that he really meant what he was saying about selling her craft.

Nevertheless, she picked up the Bower and sat down, bringing it to her lap and positioning it correctly. Nell began to play her song, the same one she always used as a baseline to judge the quality of an instrument. She had been practicing for nearly a week and loved the sound more and more each day.

And as she watched the others drift into a lull, Nell trusted that she just might manage to succeed in her efforts. She just might be able to achieve whatever she wanted. And maybe this music really was magic after all.

Chapter 10

Henry was amazed by Miss Hawkins. Although they had only spoken a little more with one another about the short answers to various questions, he trusted they would have more time to converse and share further information. What was wonderful now was watching her demonstrate each instrument and the ease with which she spoke about them.

She laughed when Daniel made a joke about his own inability to play music, and she seemed full of life and joy. It was remarkable to see her like this when he had heard about her loneliness and how she was stuck out here in the woods.

He wondered if she had friends other than Mary and the animals. Surely there were others. Surely she had gentlemen admirers as well. She was beautiful, and there was no reason they would not be interested in her.

And yet, she was still so sweet and simple. Miss Hawkins did not seem to think much of herself, but her self-consciousness had begun to melt away within the hour. It was astonishing to see the confidence growing.

Henry sensed that part of it was because Mary was present. After all, why would she not grow more comfortable when there was another young woman there? Someone she called friend. If Mary trusted the two men, he hoped Nell would as well.

“And Nell, you must tell them about the Bobbel you made as a child,” Mary said, going on about stories from the past.

Miss Hawkins began to laugh and shook her head.

“It was dreadful. I still regret undertaking such a foolish task,” she said.

“What is a Bobbel? What happened?” Daniel asked.

“It was my attempt to create a percussive, stringed instrument, which boxed in a flute,” she explained, chuckling to herself.

“And how exactly does that work?” Henry asked.

She looked at him and cocked an eyebrow, shaking her head.

“It does not,” she answered.

This sudden humour Henry saw was just as intriguing as the shy, ethereal young woman he had met the first time he came to the cottage. Miss Hawkins was still beautiful, with her blonde hair flowing in waves down her back, exceedingly long and elegant.

She wore a tan dress this time, still simple but clean and well looked after. She had all the signs of a young woman ready for love, but Henry was not sure if he would be the fortunate man who could woo her.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, Henry was startled by the sudden perching of a sparrow on his shoulder. He nearly jerked away and swatted it but immediately realised that it was Miss Hawkins’s bird, and he held back his instincts in an effort not to offend her.

“Oh, Daisy! What are you doing, my dear? We do not simply land on the shoulder of a gentleman,” Miss Hawkins scolded her.

He looked between the bird and Miss Hawkins, not quite sure what to do. While he was far from bothered, he had never had a bird so comfortable as to come this close to him before.

“You must forgive her. She is very tame and does not know that many people are uncomfortable with having a bird on their shoulder. I should feel awful if she ... does anything to your fine suit,” Miss Hawkins said, rather delicately.

Henry laughed and gave a careful shrug to let her know that he was perfectly fine.

“You needn’t worry. I am fine with it. Indeed, I have never had a bird comfortable sitting on my shoulder before. It is of no concern to me,” he said.

“Are you quite certain? I would not like you to be uncomfortable,” she said, biting her lip.

“He is just fine,” Lord Comran said, rushing to reassure her.

Henry saw a look pass between the two young women, and he was glad that Mary seemed to try and encourage Miss Hawkins. Although her concerns were very real, Henry decided not to show any contempt or discomfort for the bird. If Miss Hawkins had tamed the creature, that was something very special, and he wanted to encourage it.

“Now, I should like to hear more music,” Henry said, just trying to move the conversation along so everyone would forget about him and the bird.

Miss Hawkins and Mary arranged for the two of them to play a song together. Mary said she was not overly musical, but she could keep a steady beat, and Miss Hawkins gave her the Rollam to do just that. Before long, they were deep into the music, with Miss Hawkins playing the Bower with grace and haunting beauty.

Henry looked at Daniel, searching his friend for answers as to what he ought to do next. He could see that Daniel now understood the plight, understood why Henry was so overcome by his affections. There was no reason for him to be anything but amazed by this woman. But Daniel was clearly distracted by Mary, and that was a relief to Henry as well.

Seeing the two women perform together was intriguing, and Henry felt that he saw Miss Hawkins as more than just the lonely girl he had met before. She was so gentle in teaching Mary, slowly guiding her back to the beat when Mary briefly lost it. The gratitude and gentility in Miss Hawkins were stunning.

The song ended, and Daniel was as much in a dreamland as Henry, both standing there in shock after the lovely sound.

“It is incredible, and the way the two of you play together is most lovely,” Daniel said.

“Well, I really cannot play well,” Mary said. “I am just glad that this is one even I know how to move.”

She held up the Rommal and then handed it to Henry, who took it with surprise.

“Would you like to keep a steady beat for me while I play the Belute?” Miss Hawkins asked.

Henry swallowed, nervous at this chance. He couldn't refuse, but he feared what might happen if he lost the beat or if he otherwise embarrassed himself. He couldn't let her see him fail. What would he do if she watched him do poorly?

“Yes, of course,” he said, pretending that he could be confident. Not knowing what he was thinking, he simply listened as Miss Hawkins gave him a pace to keep, and Henry started tapping on the drum, letting the brass do its work to keep him in line. And as she began to play the flute-like instrument, Henry closed his eyes and listened closely, keeping the rhythm as best he could.

It was strange, playing music with her. Somehow, it worked. He couldn't explain why. They just sounded ... right.

It would have sounded right with anyone, he told himself. Anyone who could stay on the rhythm would do just fine with her. But Henry realised he was no longer listening to Miss Hawkins in order to keep the beat.

He was feeling it. He was sensing her. He knew when she would play a major or a minor. He knew when she was bringing the song to a point of joy before she even began that phrase.

Indeed, there was just something about how she played that led him to understand her better. He realised that this was a conversation. It was a conversation in which they were learning more about one another than speaking had done for them. He, yet again, felt her longing through the music. He understood her tragedy. And he understood her hopes and dreams.

Henry didn't want the moment to come to an end, but, alas, it did. With the final note, he struck the head of the drum, and they were finished.

Opening his eyes, he woke up from the dream he had been in and saw Daniel looking at him differently, with a new understanding and a new expectation.

"It would seem that you have a new musical partner," Mary said to Miss Hawkins.

"I daresay he was remarkable," Miss Hawkins said softly, looking at Henry with searching eyes.

Wondering if they would play another, Henry stayed silent, hoping someone would tell him what should happen next. He was still somewhat in a trance and didn't know how to break himself from it. All he wanted was to go back to the music, to know more about Miss Hawkins.

But she gasped and looked up at the sky, then back at the three of them.

“I had not realised it was getting so late. You must go. All of you. And be quick about it,” she insisted, clearly frightened by something.

“What is it? What happened?” Henry asked.

Mary just shook her head, clearly not wanting him to waste time asking questions. She rushed him, practically pushing him and Daniel away from the cottage.

Without a proper farewell, Henry moved along as he saw Miss Hawkins carry the instruments inside the house and disappear.

“What just happened?” he asked Mary as they rushed to flee down the path.

“Her mother will be home soon. I ought to have been paying closer attention. She would not be happy to see the two of you there and you would never be allowed to return,” Mary said.

“What? Why?” Henry asked.

“She is a very complicated woman,” Mary replied, still trying to urge them to come quickly as the cottage disappeared from sight behind them.

“How so?”

“You are asking many questions and you do not have time for this. We must be gone quickly. All you need to know is that Nell’s mother does not allow her to speak with men, particularly noblemen.

For Nell to get her mother to accept both of you being there, it is going to take a great deal of work, and it must happen before she catches you,” Mary said.

“And if not? What if she had come home to find us?” he asked.

“I already told you. She would have insisted that you never return. I am hardly even allowed to see Nell,” Mary said.

“But that is wrong. Why would her mother wish to keep her from people like that?” Henry asked, angered more and more as he was learning just how strict Miss Hawkins’s mother really was.

“She does not realise that what she is doing is so wrong. She thinks she is protecting Nell. She thinks it is best and that other people have poor intentions. All she wants is to keep Nell safe,” Mary said, although her tone was one of clear disapproval.

“Then why do you sound so angry?” Henry asked.

“Because I think it is nonsense, but Nell is very understanding of her mother. She wants to show her proper respect and care by listening. I wish I understood it all, but it is nearly impossible to get answers from Mrs Hawkins,” Mary said.

“And why is she worried about you being friends with her daughter?” Henry asked.

“Have you any intention of stopping with these questions? I know you wish to know more about Nell, but you need to hurry. All I know is that she thinks I could be a bad influence and here I am, running away with two gentlemen, so I suppose she may have a reason to be concerned about me,” Mary said with sarcasm.

Henry knew that no more questions would be answered, and he followed Mary with speed, alongside Daniel. They soon cleared the woods and made it back to town before returning to the inn, where Mary said goodbye. It was clear that Daniel didn't want to say farewell, but Henry was somewhat bitter that he even had the chance.

As for himself, Henry hoped he would see Miss Hawkins again. Their time together had been cut short and it was deeply unfair. He already missed her. He only needed to learn how to get around her mother without ruining their chances forever.

Chapter 11

Nell was hopeful that she would see Lord Collins again, although she could not be certain whether he would come soon. If he happened to get lost once more, she might find herself waiting until he begged Mary to bring him.

The thought of it made Nell smile to herself. She knew how difficult it was to find her home, and if Lord Collins had got lost once, there was a very good chance he would get lost again.

Two days later, however, she was pleased to look up and see him approaching, this time on his own.

“Good morning, Miss Hawkins,” he greeted, dismounting from his horse.

Nell tried to relax her shoulders but still felt such a thrill and nervousness from being with this man that she found it difficult not to be stiff. Lord Collins appeared perfectly at ease, but Nell assumed he had no reason to be nervous.

After all, he had been around women before, surely. Moreover, Nell was still trying to fight against that inkling she had, the one that told her Lord Collins might be intrigued by her even more than her instruments. And if she ignored that and imagined he was there purely for the sake of business, he would have no reason to be nervous anyway.

“Good morning, Mr. Collins,” she finally replied. “I see you found your

way to my home with ease today?”

“I did, indeed. And I am glad about it. To be honest, I think it would have been rather humiliating if I had not been able to find you myself. There are some things that a man ought to be able to do without help, and I daresay that directions are one of them,” he said with a laugh.

For a long moment, they looked into one another’s eyes and smiled. But when Nell realised that she was caught up in the distraction of the moment and remembered herself, she exhaled and focused instead on the matter at hand. He had told her about his interest in her instruments, and that was what she needed to think about.

“Well, now I suppose you wish to see the progress I have made in making the duplicate instruments,” she said, shifting the conversation. Nell had been working on a replica of her Belute and set it next to the original, so Lord Collins could compare the two.

“It looks beautiful. Very identical,” he noted.

“I did my best, but I still feel that the bell is just a fraction larger on the original. I am trying to hollow out the duplicate to the same diameter, but I am very worried about making it too wide, so I am going rather slowly,” she explained.

Lord Collins squinted and took a closer look before nodding with understanding. Although it was clear that he wanted to agree with her, Nell sensed that he could see no difference between the two instruments.

“You must forgive me if I bore you with the details,” she said apologetically.

“There is nothing to forgive,” he replied, shaking his head. “The details are what make your instruments so unique and lovely. I imagine they would not be half so intriguing if you were not cautious about these things.”

“It is vital to ensuring the tone is as I wish. But regardless of that, is there anything you would like me to change for the sake of your business? I understand that if you were to sell instruments, it would be a change from your usual fare, but if I can help in any way, please tell me,” Nell said.

“Oh ... the business! Yes, of course,” he said as if he had forgotten entirely.

“Yes ... yes, there is something to change?” she asked uncertainly.

“No, no. That is not what I meant. It is only that I was so distracted by the instruments themselves I had utterly forgotten why it was that I have come. Now, as for the idea of selling them, I still must await an answer from one of the company’s other owners.

It would require a great deal of conversation and shifting with our customers. We need them to continue thinking of us in terms of furnishings for their homes, but if we add music to our repertoire, it would be a big change. We need to do it with finesse,” he explained.

“Most certainly,” Nell agreed.

She did not entirely understand his reasoning, but Nell wanted to impress Lord Collins as much as she imagined he was trying to impress her. It was a game, she sensed. And somehow, deep down, she knew that this was a game men and women had played since the beginning of time.

Always trying to prove themselves, always hoping to stand out and be special in the eyes of another.

Indeed, despite never having spoken with a man before, she knew this much to be true.

But Nell didn't linger too much on this, instead focusing on Lord Collins as he looked over the instrument, taking in the details. He seemed to notice the little details, but she couldn't be sure what it was he observed when looking it over.

"It is very beautiful. I like how you really accentuated the grain," he noted.

"Yes, I find it best to let the wood really display its beauty. There is nothing more boring than an instrument which sounds lovely but appears dull and uninteresting," she said.

"How did you find the tools to carve it so well?"

"Mary brought me some of the things I needed, and I am fortunate to have some skill with my hands. I know how to gently craft it rather than simply chipping away at shards of wood," she told him with a shrug.

Lord Collins looked at Nell with a flash of displeasure. Something was bothering him. Nell couldn't be sure what it was or if she had somehow caused him to feel this way.

But when she noted how he was chewing the inside of his cheek, as though searching for the right words to a question he wished to ask, she realised there must simply be something else on his mind. He must have questions that he had not yet known how to ask her.

"Is something frustrating you, Lord Collins?" she asked, gently, leaning forward slightly to read his face as he looked away.

He chuckled to himself and turned back to her with a kind expression in his eyes before he answered.

"You must forgive me for being so dreadful at hiding my thoughts. As it happens, I am bothered by the fact that I am learning a bit about your skills to carve your instruments, but I have a great many more questions for you," he said.

Nell was taken aback somewhat, but she understood his sentiment. What fun was it to speak only of these works when they could just as well use the time more wisely? She certainly wanted to know more about Lord Collins. If he wanted to learn more about her as well, why had she not made a stronger effort to ask?

"And what questions might those be?" she asked, giving him a chance to ask first.

He hesitated as though embarrassed he had even brought up the idea. Still, Nell was eager to answer anything he wanted to know.

“You clearly love not only music but animals as well. Your bird, for instance,” he said, gesturing to Daisy as she spiraled down in flight towards them and perched on the Rommal beside Nell.

“Yes, Daisy has been my friend for nearly two years. I rescued her when there was a storm that knocked her from the nest. She had no feathers yet and had likely hatched a day or two before.

Her wing was injured, and I thought that her foot might be as well. Sadly, her mother abandoned her, and I had no choice but to keep her alive,” Nell explained.

“Two years ago? How wonderful that she has had you to look after her for all this time,” Lord Collins said.

“I am the fortunate one. She has been a companion when I needed one most. My only grief is knowing that I shall have only a year or so more with her. At times, she has brought her offspring to me as well, but once they are old enough, they fly away, and then I must await her next brood,” Nell said.

Lord Collins was looking at her with a sparkle in his eye, and Nell’s stomach turned with a strange excitement. She smiled and waited for him to speak again.

“You are remarkable,” he said, taking her off guard.

“Remarkable?” she scoffed. “I am nothing of the sort.”

“On the contrary, you are. I have never known anyone quite like you,” he said.

Nell bit her lip, flattered by his words. She knew that it was foolish to get caught up in what he had said but couldn't help herself. More than anything, she wanted to know if what he'd said was a compliment or merely an observation. But to ask him outright? How could she do something so bold?

In the end, there was little she could do but return the sentiment.

“I have never known anyone like you either,” she replied.

“Is that so? But you hardly know anything about me,” Lord Collins replied with a grin.

“Then I suppose you had best tell me,” Nell quipped, surprised at how easy it was.

Lord Collins laughed and rubbed the back of his neck in thought for a moment.

“That is a very good suggestion, and I would be happy to tell you more about myself. In due time, I expect that we will come to be good friends, and with your wit, I would be happy to come here frequently so that we may,” he said.

“That would be an honour for me. Mary is the only company I have—aside from Daisy, of course—and she only comes once or twice per week. Usually, she is unable to stay for long,” Nell told him.

“I should hate to think of you being lonely. I live in London, so I would not be able to come much more often than that, but with the other business we have in Hartville, purchasing from a carpenter in town, I will be here at times for work anyway,” he said.

Nell was glad to hear it. Still, she felt the terrible dread in her chest that reminded her she still didn’t know his exact station in society. Her mother would be angry no matter what, given the fact that he was a lord, but the level of his nobility was still a mystery.

And if his nobility happened to place him in a prominent role in London, Nell was certain that her mother would put an end to this before Nell had the answers she sought.

Indeed, there was little point in spending time with this man. At the end of it all, would they even have another chance to see one another? Or would she be wise enough to stop this before it could go any further?

Chapter 12

Henry sensed that Miss Hawkins had another question—or perhaps it was a concern. She was, evidently, rather distressed by something, and he couldn't imagine what it might be. But she had already seen through his worries. Would he now respond by addressing hers as well? Or would he give her the grace to sit with dignity and bring attention to her concerns in her own time?

Deciding that his best chance of making her comfortable was for him to simply wait, Henry continued talking with Miss Hawkins about her bird and other animals she had rescued or otherwise helped in some way. To think that she had cared so much for all those creatures, Henry was moved by her sensitive heart.

“And when I uncovered the rabbit's nest while tilling the soil, I knew I had a choice. I could try to cover it again and hope the mother would not abandon them, or I could be selfish and claim the little ones for my own. Oh, how I wanted to keep them!” she said with a joyful laugh.

“I would think you would rather be rid of them before they ate everything in your garden,” Henry said, glancing over at the small space required to provide adequate food for two women. He couldn't imagine they produced enough to share with wild animals as well.

“No, we quite enjoy allowing the animals freedom here. We find the symbiotic relationship with nature to be the most conducive to our life. Why would we wish to be rid of the rabbits when they give our soil such health?” she asked.

Henry had no response to that, having very little knowledge of gardening. In truth, he had never paid much attention to the natural world, having been raised primarily in London and going from

building to building by coach or horse the majority of the time.

Although he enjoyed being outside and had indulged in his travel to Hartville as it gave him a chance to explore the world around him, it was still not something he was greatly accustomed to.

“I think it is wonderful that you are so generous with creatures and the natural world. We do not have such a luxury in London. Or, perhaps, it is just that men like myself are never conscious of it. We are so busy running around and going to and fro, we scarcely give a thought to anything but what must be done for the sake of the kingdom,” he confessed.

“And what is that?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What is it that must always be done? What do you do for the sake of London? Why are you always kept busy?” Miss Hawkins asked him.

“To be truthful, very little of importance. So much of the time, I feel that my role is nothing more than maintaining the appearance of my station. To think that I shall be an earl one day is not something which gives me great passion,” he admitted with a laugh.

Miss Hawkins went pale, and she leaned back slightly away from him. Henry was taken aback by her shock. What had he said to bother her? Why was she upset?

“Miss Hawkins, are you all right? Have I said something wrong?” he

asked.

“No, I ...” she trailed off and looked away, seemingly flustered by something he had shared.

“Please, do tell me. What is it? What bothers you?” he pressed.

“I knew that you were a nobleman, but I was unaware of your exact rank,” she told him in a small voice. Her eyes were still trained on the ground, as though she was too ashamed to look at him.

“And you are displeased by this?”

“Not displeased,” she replied, quickly, looking at him again. “Of course, I cannot be unhappy for you and that you are a man of high standing in society. I am perfectly happy for you about that. What I mean is that ... well, it is somewhat difficult for me as I ...”

Her fear was palpable, and Henry still could not understand why she was so upset about this. Didn't she understand that there was nothing about his station which made him any different from her? All it meant was that he had certain expectations placed on him in society. Why was she acting so strangely?

Miss Hawkins took a deep breath, clearly gathering her thoughts before she was willing to open up to Henry about whatever was on her mind. He waited patiently and gave her a chance to collect herself before she proceeded.

“My mother has warned me against men of your rank. I always

questioned whether it was true, but she never allowed me to voice that curiosity. All I know of men like you is that you are ... that you have ill intentions,” she said with confusion.

Henry could hardly believe what he was hearing. Her mother had warned against noblemen? Certainly there were those who may have had dreadful purposes, but that was not all of them. And had she not realised by now that he was a good man?

That thought was a bit foolish, Henry recognised. After all, she did not know him well, and he had no reason to simply expect her to trust him. Nevertheless, Henry longed for Miss Hawkins to accept him and know that he was a good man.

It was unfair that she would listen to her mother rather than her own instinct. He had never been improper with her or given her reason to doubt him, even in their brief meetings.

He was eager to challenge her, but Miss Hawkins appeared still to be working through what was in her mind.

“I know that she must have been wrong. You have been kind to me at every turn. I would never want to assume that you are anything but the gentleman you have already proven yourself to be. Still, I have to remember my mother in this.

She would be furious about your visits to me if she knew that you had come and that you were a nobleman. She would never forgive me for welcoming you here,” Miss Hawkins confessed.

“And do you think it is appropriate for her to keep you sheltered away like this where you are unable to find out the truth of others? Do you

think it is right that she should force you into seclusion and prevent you from discovering whether men such as myself are truly villainous or if we are decent men?" he challenged, unable to stop himself.

But she gave him a sad smile, clearly disturbed by the reality that she had no choice. This was her life, and her mother had already decided what was to come for her.

"I am sorry, but I do fear what might happen if she discovers the truth. If she learns that you have been coming here and that you will be an earl, I am certain she would insist that we no longer meet. And my mother is all I have in this world. She is the only one who has been by my side. Although I can see that she was wrong about this, I still trust her," Miss Hawkins told him.

Discouraged and burdened by this information, Henry wasn't sure what to say or do. He knew in his heart that he was drawn more and more towards Miss Hawkins, that he wanted to know her better and be a part of her life. But if she continued in the ways of her mother, in the ideas that she must be wary of men like him, how could he possibly proceed?

How could he convince her to trust him and to believe that he would never do her any harm?

It seemed to be impossible, and Henry didn't know how to move forward.

He liked this woman, slightly strange though she was. But he also knew that her mother was not the only obstacle they would face. His own father would never allow the match. He would be furious and never give Henry a moment to engage with Miss Hawkins.

When he took time to remember this, Henry was suddenly aware that all this had been doomed, to begin with. If her mother would never allow them to be together and his father would feel the same, what was he thinking? What did he intend to do? There would never be a moment of peace between them.

Henry sighed in defeat, and Miss Hawkins looked contrite, as though she believed it all to be her fault. Henry didn't know how to tell her that he wanted more than just these visits. It was unspoken between them, but he sensed that she knew exactly what it was that he wanted.

It was not the instruments. It was her.

"Have I upset you?" Miss Hawkins asked quietly.

"No, not at all. I simply regret that I am not trustworthy to a woman like your mother. If she would think ill of me, I am sure that you must feel the same," he said.

"But that is simply not true. As I have already said, I do think well of you. That is why I am so confused by it all. How could I think poorly of you when I know already that you are a good man? You have been so kind and generous in this short period since we met," she said.

"And I have left you with uncertainty. I raised your hopes about the instruments, but I am not even sure if we can sell them. That is my fault. I was foolish for exciting you when we know not whether I shall even be able to proceed as I wish," he said.

“You mustn’t worry about it,” she said sweetly. Much to Henry’s surprise, she gently placed a comforting hand on his arm.

But at the same moment he noticed it, she seemed to as well. Miss Hawkins pulled back in shock at what she had done.

“F-forgive me. I did not mean to ...”

“Please, you should not apologise. It is quite all right. Indeed, it is lovely that you would be so empathetic. Truly, I am glad that you would be comfortable enough to reach out like that,” Henry said. He left out the part in which he felt a jolt of excitement at her touch, as though he had awakened for the very first time.

But it was clear that Miss Hawkins was already feeling embarrassed, and Henry decided to simply let go of the moment, no matter how desperately he wished to cling to it. He wanted her to be at peace and unafraid of their interactions, and this was the best way to help her achieve that.

Moreover, Henry knew by now that his time with her was coming to an end. He had been there no more than an hour, but she was nervous enough that he sensed he ought to depart.

“Miss Hawkins,” he said, “I must go. But know that, if it pleases you, this will not be the last time you have seen me.”

Chapter 13

When Nell's mother returned home after a day of working in town, Nell knew she had no choice but to approach her about the questions that lingered in her mind.

It would certainly not be an easy conversation, but Nell was prepared for that. More than anything, she wanted to understand her mother and the reason behind her venom towards men such as Lord Collins.

They sat at the dinner table, and her mother gave a stretch, clearly tired from the long day. Nell passed her the roasted carrots, and her mother took a generous helping.

"It looks wonderful, Nell. You are such a good cook," she said.

"I take after you, Mother," Nell replied.

They ate in silence for a moment before Nell finally found the courage to ask her mother with boldness.

"Mother, there is something about which I would like to speak with you. I know you have told me about your distaste for nobility, particularly the men of that rank. But—"

"Nell, darling, must we talk about this again? Why have you suddenly become so interested?" her mother asked in frustration.

Nell didn't wish to give her mother a reason to be suspicious and knew that she must tread lightly, or her parent would start wondering if Nell had met someone. That was simply something Nell couldn't risk. She feared what might happen if her mother learned the truth before she was ready.

"I suppose I have been thinking about our life here. Please, do not misunderstand me. I do love it here. But there are days when I wish to go out. You seem frightened by the thought that I might stumble upon a nobleman and that I will lose everything, but I am not sure why. Why must I be kept here simply because of that fear?" she asked, anxious about how her mother might respond.

Her mother bit her lip and pushed the carrots around on her plate, staring at them as though they might give her the answers she needed. But Nell waited, knowing her mother would have to accept that this could no longer be ignored.

"Nell, I fear for you because I never want you to make the same mistakes that I made in life. There are things I regret. Things that left me brokenhearted. And if I could take them back, if I could just stop you from ever being hurt like that, I would do anything," her mother said.

"But what things, Mother? What happened that left you so hateful against nobles?" Nell pressed.

Her mother took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I loved your father. I truly did. But he was not my first choice. He was not the first man I fell in love with and he ... he came at a time when I needed comfort ... when I needed someone to protect me and

make me feel cared for,” she said.

“But there was another before him?”

“There was,” her mother confirmed. “We met while I was out walking one day. He had fallen from his horse, and I rushed over to him, carrying a basketful of bread on my way to the market to sell it for my mother. He was all right, but we began talking, and he was ... friendly.

Anyway, he asked about me, and he promised to come to see me again. He even bought all the bread and said that a young woman as lovely as I should not have to spend my day on anything but enjoying life.”

Her mother smiled sadly, clearly fond of the memory but heartbroken at the same time.

“The following day, my mother and father were out, and I heard something outside. I went to look, and I saw that it was him. He had come to my home. He even waited until after my mother was gone before coming to the door.

And when I opened it, I knew in my heart that he had come to sweep me away into a wonderful bliss,” her mother continued.

It was strange and difficult to hear this story and wonder what had happened that changed her mother’s heart. Who was this man that he had caused her mother so much pain?

“And did he? Did he sweep you away into bliss?”

“For a time,” her mother said, nodding. “But it was short-lived. And when he finally ended it ... he did not do so in a mature manner, as a man ought to do. Rather, he slowly began to disappear. He came around less often. And then, he stopped coming altogether.”

The hurt in her mother’s voice was evident. A small crack alerted Nell to the fact that her mother was barely holding her emotions together.

“By the time he stopped coming to see me, I understood what it meant. But it was not until I saw him in town that I had the opportunity to address it properly,” she said.

“It was not a busy road. In fact, I think there may have been only two or three people who passed us by, no one even stopping to note what was taking place. And I saw him, thinking it was such a great fortune that I would finally have a chance to confront him, to ask him if we ever meant anything at all.

“But when I asked, he simply laughed. He drew his brows together as though genuinely confused ... as if he had never imagined that I thought it held meaning. He asked me if I was serious, if I truly thought an earl would lower himself to the standard of a woman like me,” she said, her voice shifting again with the bitterness of humiliation.

Nell’s lips parted with shock, imagining how much pain her mother must have been in after something like that. Although she hated to think it, she understood now why her mother had been so angry and hurt.

What woman would not be wounded by the mocking of a man like that? What woman would ever feel confident in herself again after this treatment?

“I am sorry, Mother. That must have been dreadfully upsetting. How your heart must have ached!” she exclaimed.

“Indeed, it did. He was the first man I ever loved, and I never imagined he would treat me this way. Even now, all these years later, I still grieve everything he put me through. I still wonder if I was a fool for trusting him or if something happened that changed him,” she said.

“Do you think he ever spoke with his mother and father about you?” Nell asked.

Her mother’s expression twisted as she considered the question.

“Well, that was part of what left me so confused. He had told me that he was going to. And then, I did not see him for two weeks. And when he did come, he was different. I wondered at first if it had been a matter of his mother and father, but then he was so cruel towards me, and I imagined that, perhaps, there had been a reason for it after all.

Maybe they told him to hurt me in order to keep us apart. I never learned the full extent of it, but I do know that how he behaved was unforgivable, and I would never allow anyone I care for to suffer through such heartache and cruelty as I did,” she said.

Nell thought about it for a long moment, wondering what it meant for her future. She had already known that her mother would be angry

about Lord Collins, but this left her with far graver concerns. Now, she understood why her mother hated the nobles so deeply. But it wasn't right. And it certainly was not fair.

Lord Collins was nothing like this man about which her mother spoke. He was a good man, a gentle one. He had a kind heart, and he was so tender towards her. Nell was convinced that if her mother truly knew him, she would see that he wasn't at all like the man who had hurt her mother.

He wasn't anything like those awful men her mother had warned her about. But how? How could she make her mother see it?

"Now, is that all you wished to know? Or have you more questions?" her mother asked.

Nell shook her head, not wanting to make her mother think about it any longer. It was clear that it brought her pain, and Nell didn't wish to be the cause of any further hurt.

"Very well. In that case, I shall simply hope that you now have a better understanding about why I have tried so hard to keep you safe all these years. I know that it has not always been easy. I know that you want freedom, that you want to live a life outside of what I have allowed.

It is understandable, and I cannot be upset that you would wish for more than this life. But know, my dear, that I would only ever put you through this for your own good," her mother said.

"I know that, Mother. But what I struggle to accept is that this is my own good at all. Can you not see that ... that I want more than this? Is

there nothing about the world out there, beyond this home, that you agree is good for me? That would make me happy?" Nell asked, gently challenging her mother's thoughts without pushing her to frustration or sadness.

"Of course there are. I simply have to learn to release my fears if you are going to pursue them. And if you choose to go out into the world and enjoy it for what it is? I shall have to accept it without sadness. You deserve to be happy, Nell. And I shall try much harder to give you the chance to have that happiness," she said.

"How so?" Nell asked, her heart racing with the hope that her mother would give her a little more freedom.

"Well, I know you have your friend, Mary. She seems to make you happy. Perhaps, rather than only going into town with me, you may go with her now and then," her mother said, struggling to smile.

"Truly, Mother? You would allow me to go to town with Mary? She will be so happy! As am I! This is wonderful, Mother. Thank you!" Nell exclaimed, hardly able to contain herself.

The strain in her mother's gaze did not diminish, but Nell understood that she was finally going to have some of the happiness she had been longing for. She would be able to drift away from the cottage now and then. It was the best news she could have fathomed.

But Nell's mother cleared her throat and pasted on a smile that Nell could not mistake for sadness.

"I have very little appetite, my dear. Thank you for the lovely meal,

but I think I must go and get some rest,” her mother said, standing quickly and leaving the table.

Nell watched her go, wondering if she ought to have left it all alone and simply accepted her lot in life.

As it was, she couldn't understand why her mother hated all noblemen just because of the actions of one. Discouraged and not knowing what to do with her own feelings, Nell cleared the table and thought about it all, cycling through the same thoughts again and again, wondering what was to be done.

Once she had finished, she went outside with the Bower and began to play, losing herself to the mournful sound she had created, writing her hopes and loss in another song.

Chapter 14

Nell's heart raced as she awaited Mary. It was only going to be a short time before the two of them went into town together, without Nell's mother. That alone was a wonder, but Nell was far more overcome by the excitement that she would simply be surrounded by people.

She could smile demurely and greet them and not keep her head down at all times with worry that her mother might think she was looking at this or that gentleman with interest.

"Is she coming soon?" Nell's mother asked, joining her outside as she waited for Mary.

"Yes, she is. She should be here at any moment. You will like her very much, I am sure. She is a kind woman and a good friend. I think you will be glad that I have someone like her in my life," Nell said.

"Yes, I am sure I shall," her mother said with a strained smile.

At last, Mary came walking down the small lane through the trees, a grin on her face, which Nell interpreted as support for her.

"Mary!" Nell exclaimed excitedly.

"Nell, darling, I am sorry if I am late. Matthew needed my help with an escaped chicken," Mary said with a laugh, speaking about the younger brother Nell had never met.

"You mustn't worry about it. Mary, this is my mother, Mrs Leah Hawkins," Nell introduced. "Mother, this is Mary Blake."

"It is very nice to meet you, Mary. I am glad to finally know the young woman who has been such a good friend to Nell," her mother said.

"And I am delighted to know you as well, Mrs Hawkins. Nell is such a good woman, and she speaks so highly of you that I feel as if we have already met," Mary said.

"I suppose a young woman must speak that way of her mother. Otherwise, what will people think of her?" Nell's mother asked with an awkward laugh.

There was tension in the air, and Nell felt terribly uncomfortable as her mother and her friend stood there, attempting to get along when it was clear that they each believed the other was not good for Nell.

Many times, Nell had told her mother that Mary was a good friend, that she was not trying to send Nell out into the world or get her into dangerous situations. She was a good woman, a kind one. She had become very important to Nell. And likewise, Nell had been forced to defend her mother to Mary.

She had been given no choice but to tell Mary about all the wonderful things her mother had done and how she was only concerned about keeping Nell away from things that posed a threat.

"Well, I suppose the two of you had best run along now," her mother said, urging them to go. She gave Nell a final, pained expression

before turning and going back into the house.

Nell and Mary quickly rushed away, leaving the cottage behind in their new adventure.

“I can hardly believe that I am getting to go into town. And with you! Not my mother, but my friend,” Nell said with astonishment.

“That is precisely how it ought to be, Nell. You need to have time with your friends, not only with your mother. You should understand that this is how life is meant to be lived. You are a young woman who ought to enjoy life, not be cooped up in the house at all times,” Mary told her.

“And I do try, but it is very hard sometimes,” Nell said.

“You mean it is difficult because your mother does not allow it,” Mary corrected her.

Nell did not respond, but they reached the centre of Hartville soon enough, and Nell’s face lit up with excitement as she looked around the town at all there was to do.

She had very little money, but there was some in her purse that she had saved when her mother gave her coins now and then. Nell never spent it when she was with her mother in town. Now, she would not have to worry about anything her mother might say.

If Nell wished to buy ribbons, her mother would not be there to ask whom she was trying to impress. Or, if she chose to buy scent, she would not have to worry about her mother thinking she was hoping for the keen eye of a gentleman.

Perhaps Nell was somewhat paranoid, assuming her mother thought these things, but with Nell's life, it made sense that her mother would be concerned.

"What is happening over there?" Mary asked, noting that there was a small crowd of bystanders.

Nell squinted to get a better look and quickly saw a bird was caught in some sort of netting. When it tried to fly away, it dangled oddly, as though its foot was broken. Immediately, Nell gasped and rushed over, pushing her way to the front of the small gathering.

"Foolish thing got caught. Here, let me get it," said one gruff man. Nell was certain that his large, rough hands would break the creature's foot.

"Allow me," she interjected, stepping closer and slowly moving her hand into position. The bird was clearly upset to have so many humans nearby, but Nell knew what she was doing.

"What are you thinking, girl?" another man asked, every bit as gruffly as the first.

"I can ease it out of the net without injuring it further. Now, if you please, take a step back. All of you. The bird is distressed, and having all of us here does not help," she said in a soft voice, trying to soothe the bird.

She was relieved that the others took her command and did as instructed, stepping away from her with caution.

Nell gently freed the bird and scooped it into her hand. It would likely try to fly away, but it would be rather difficult for it to land. The left foot was mangled, broken at a strange angle.

“Nell, what are you going to do now?” Mary asked.

“I shall have to help it. It will not be able to stand without pain,” Nell said.

“Are you quite serious? You intend to try and save the bird? Bring it healing?” one of the men scoffed.

“Are we not responsible for looking after God’s creatures?” Nell challenged him.

“Whatever you say, lass. I never thought I would see the day when a girl is so devoted to the rescue of a bird that she would order about a group of men,” another grumbled.

Nell realised that she had offended the men, but she couldn’t help feeling relieved that she had saved the bird. Deciding she had done enough, for now, she nodded to Mary that they had best depart from there and go to any shops or places they wished.

For the moment, she kept the bird covered safely in her hands to keep it calm, allowing it to get comfortable as she walked. At home, she

had a large cage that she had used for Daisy to keep her safe until she was ready to fly free. She would need to take care of the bird until getting home and putting it in there.

“You are so amazing with animals. It is a wonder that you are not constantly surrounded by them. If I were an animal and I ever needed anything, I would simply come to you,” Mary said.

“Sometimes, I feel as though they do,” Nell replied.

“Well, regardless of whether they do or not, I am glad you have such a gift and that you will have a new little friend for Daisy,” Mary said.

“Yes, I hope so,” Nell replied. “For such a long time, animals were the only friends I had. I would never lose my appreciation of them by forgetting all the good they have done for me. There are still many days when I think that I would not be where I am, that I would not have this joy, had I never had an opportunity to nurture Daisy.”

Perhaps it was nonsensical, but that was the truth. Nell was grateful for the companionship of that little bird, and this one was already proving to be rather gentle and at peace.

As the two walked through town, Mary showed Nell a few small shops where she most liked to indulge when she was making purchases. Nell loved looking at the extravagant gowns that neither she nor Mary would ever be able to afford. Nevertheless, it was exciting to see the beauty in each of the shops.

“And what about shoes? Have you any need for new shoes?” Mary asked.

Nell laughed and shook her head. In truth, Nell scarcely wore shoes at

all save for when she came into town like this. Even if she'd had enough money for a new pair, she knew it would be little more than a waste of her time and money to find any.

“Very well, then what may we find you?” Mary asked.

“If I see anything I want, I shall speak up and buy it. But I will not search for something just because I finally have the opportunity to do so. As long as I am here, I shall be happy. This is already a gift for me,” Nell said.

Mary shrugged.

“Whatever you say, Nell. But I do hope you find something lovely,” she said.

At one point, they walked slowly past a jewellery shop, just as Mary struck up a conversation about the friend of Lord Collins, Lord Comran. It was clear that Mary liked him.

But Nell was, momentarily, caught up in the distraction of the gems that glittered through the window. She tried to ignore the longings she felt deep down, clearing them from her mind so that she could focus on Mary's words instead.

“He is simply the most handsome man I have met in all my life. I do hope that he returns soon so that I may see him again. Has Lord Collins come back to visit you?” Mary asked.

“Not since Thursday, but I already told you about that. It was the day

I spoke with my mother about her distaste for nobles,” Nell replied.

“Oh, yes, of course. Well, I hope he returns soon and brings his friend along. Honestly, if I do not have another chance to see him soon, I fear that I shall ache with sadness!” Mary exclaimed dramatically.

Nell could not help chuckling, which Mary joined with laughter of her own. They simply had to accept themselves as utterly lovesick and hopeful of a future with men who would never be allowed to marry women like the two of them, who had no nobility running through their veins.

“At least you have a relative who is a baron. That must count for something,” Nell reminded Mary.

“That is nothing,” Mary said, brushing away the thought. “He is a cousin, and it does nothing to impact my rank. Besides, would an earl like Lord Comran ever want to marry the cousin of a lowly baron? I think not.”

“It is better than being the strange woman who carves instruments that no one has heard of,” Nell reminded her.

“But I can see that Lord Collins cares nothing at all about your station. He is smitten by you, Mary. Anyone could see it. You must think better of yourself, for he certainly does.

And if you are too caught up in feeling sad that you are unsure of the future you may or may not have, just remember that Lord Collins came back to see you. That is all you need to know,” Mary said.

It made Nell smile to think about it. He really had come back to see her. That had to mean something, didn't it?

Maybe it meant that he found her instruments intriguing, or maybe he was a scoundrel like her mother thought of men like him. But Nell couldn't imagine either of those being possible.

She did not know him well, but she knew him well enough to trust that, maybe, he was beginning to care about her. And if so, what more could she hope for?

Chapter 15

Henry was glad to see Daniel, hoping for another ear to listen to his thoughts regarding Miss Hawkins. He had been so caught up in what he hoped for that he needed to find someone else who would hear him out.

“I am glad that you went to see her again. In all honesty, however, I wish you had told me beforehand. I would have liked to join you so that I might see Mary,” Daniel said.

Henry felt awful for not having considered it. He could tell that Daniel liked Mary. Of course he would have wanted to come along and see her.

But there was still time to make it right. After all, Henry was desperate to go and see Miss Hawkins again soon, and when he did, he would take Daniel.

“We must make a plan to go soon. What about Wednesday? Would you be able to join me for a trip to Hartville? Perhaps we may go and visit them both and have a chance to learn more about them,” Henry suggested.

“I would like that very much. And what more did you learn about Miss Hawkins when you went before? Surely you had a chance to ask her some questions and the like?”

“I did,” Henry replied with a smile. “She is truly the most remarkable woman. What shocks me, however, is how isolated she is. And her mother is quite obsessed with keeping her at home. I cannot imagine

life being stuck like that. I wish that I could simply break her free, rescue her from that unfortunate circumstance,” Henry said.

“And what then? How are you going to get her free? And then what would you do? Do you think your father would be any kinder about the potential for you to marry a woman who is not nobility?” Daniel challenged him.

“Of course not,” he sighed. “But what else can I do but dream?”

“I suppose that is what you must decide. If you wish, you may put aside your father’s hopes and prejudices. You may tell him that you will not bow to whatever it is that he commands. But I do understand that such a thing is impossible for most men.

And even if he were to accept what you wish, that does not mean society would be any kinder. You would live your life caught up in the uncertainty of how your wife would be treated,” he said.

“As would you. If you choose to pursue a future with Mary, you would also have to accept that others would not support you,” Henry reminded him.

“Yes, but I would be able to speak much about her cousin and share that he is a baron. It may not be much, but she is technically, distantly noble,” Daniel said with a laugh in his own defence.

Henry chuckled and shook his head, understanding what a poor defence it really was. But they were both desperate for a chance to convince others that there was nothing wrong with their interest in these women. And, truly, what was the matter with caring for someone outside of their rank? There was nothing about Mary or Miss

Hawkins that made either of them less than wonderful. They deserved every bit as much as the women who had far more.

“If you like Mary so much, you ought to pursue her. I am sure you will find a way,” Henry said.

“And I would say the same to you in return. Whatever men like your father have to say about it, you are the only one who may decide your future. You are the only one who can say what sort of woman you will fall in love with.

And if your father is displeased, that is his own right. But he cannot stop you from having the future that you want for yourself. No one can stop you,” Daniel said.

Henry wished it could be true, but he understood just how great a risk it was trying to hope that his father would truly honour that. More than likely, his father would find a way to step in and prevent anything from happening between Henry and Miss Hawkins, no matter how desperately Henry may fight for it.

And if Henry found himself without any support in his quest to be with Miss Hawkins, he would have no choice but to concede to the future already decided for him.

Even if he did everything within his power to have a future with her, he would be stuck. They would be separated. And there was nothing that anyone could do to fix the matter. His father would insist they never see one another again, and if he were caught disobeying that demand, Henry would be in graver trouble than ever before.

He and Daniel spoke at length about their hopes and how they might find a way to manipulate their circumstances. But Daniel would have a far easier chance at making the future he wanted. He was an earl.

His father had passed, and his mother was rather soft and had a heart for those outside noble society. Moreover, even though it was a slight relation and Mary still had no nobility in her own veins, the excuse that she was related to a baron was at least something he could use to try and build clout for Mary's station. Little though it was, Daniel could use it to his advantage.

But that evening, Henry was waiting for dinner with his father. They sat at the table as the maid brought out the first course, and it was clear that his father was already in a sour mood, impatient and frustrated without reason.

"Are you all right, Father? You seem rather unhappy," Henry noted.

"And why should I be happy? Surely you know as well as I do that our business needs a decent boost," he grumbled.

"But I thought that we were doing very well, Father. Have we not seen rather grand increases in our margins of late? And did the new partnership with Mr Winslow not bring us even greater prospects for the days ahead?" Henry asked.

His father scoffed and flashed Henry a dark look.

"What is the matter with you, boy? Surely you ought to know by now

that there is much more to it than that. We have a great deal of work ahead of us, and we cannot sit idly by and be satisfied with the success of the past.

We must look to the prospects of the future. I should be gravely concerned if my son were willing to be a fool who just wastes away, letting the business pass him by.

Do you not know the importance of these opportunities ahead of us? Do you not know that we have to grasp them at every turn?" his father challenged.

"But what opportunities have we missed, Father? You were displeased when I suggested selling instruments, but you say that we are missing other opportunities. I cannot understand what you are thinking when you are rid of one idea and unhappy about another," Henry addressed.

"And why should I be happy that you are suddenly interested in the nonsense of musical instruments when they are made by some creature in the woods?" his father grunted.

"She is not a creature in the woods, Father. She is just a young woman who has a skill," Henry said.

"And you are intrigued by her," his father added, his voice still irritated and cold.

"That is nonsense. Now, what is it that you wish to do for the business moving forward?" Henry asked.

"I need you to ensure that Hartville is covered by us. I do not want a single household in that village purchasing from anyone but us. We are the best there is in this business, and it is vital that everyone knows it," his father said.

"Of course, Father," Henry agreed. "I shall do whatever I must."

"Good," his father said, by way of conclusion.

They were quiet for a moment, eating their food and ignoring one another as they were both lost to their thoughts.

"May I ask, Father, since you mentioned it, what is the matter with a man caring for a woman outside of his station? I do have a friend who has feelings for a young woman who is related to a baron. She, herself, has no nobility. Would you think him a fool just because she is not of his rank?" Henry asked.

"It depends," his father replied.

"On what?"

"Is the man a baron?" his father asked.

"No. He is an earl, just as you are," Henry answered. His father made a mock-retching sound, perfectly unmannerly for the table.

“That is most distasteful for a man of my station. I cannot imagine marrying the daughter or sister of a baron, much less a distant relative. Your friend is a fool for considering this, and he ought to be ashamed of his actions,” Henry’s father declared.

He had not mentioned Daniel for this very reason. He had a terrible feeling that his father would make this exact assumption, and it was an ugly thing, to be sure. Henry couldn’t imagine why his father would have such prejudice against those of lower rank, but he had always been this way. He had always seen them as lesser and unimportant.

It was a terrible way to behave, as far as Henry was concerned, but that didn’t change the fact that it was simply what his father believed and how he would always think.

“Father, would you never accept a life in which you were not wealthy and had no title? What if you had not been born into this life? What would you do if you were just like any other man out in the world who works hard and is never properly rewarded for it?” Henry asked.

“Fortunately, I shall never have to find out. As you know, I have done quite a bit to maintain my position in society. Marrying a woman of a lesser station would certainly be the one thing needed to ruin any man, and I would be a fool if I relented to such a thing,” he said.

“And Mother? She was the daughter of a duke, correct? Does that mean she married less than her station?” Henry asked.

Once again, his father scoffed and shook his head.

“Of course not. Her father was a duke, but she was not. She was just a woman. It is important to marry the daughter of an earl or a duke for the sake of your own position. Hers, however? What is she going to do? Whether she marries an earl or a duke, they are both above her,” his father said.

Henry thought this double standard was shocking and disturbing. He could hardly believe that his father would be so nonchalant about it all, that he cared so little about the things he said and the women about whom he spoke. Whatever had taken place in his father's life, Henry was beginning to wonder if he had always been this way or if he had grown worse with age.

Moreover, had he treated Henry's mother even worse than Henry knew? Had his father always thought so little of her even though her family's position had been above his own?

Henry was more distraught than ever, knowing his father would always be this way, and it would most assuredly impact Henry's affection for Miss Hawkins. It felt as though everything was working to drive them apart. But could he give up? Or did it just mean he would have to fight that much harder?

Chapter 16

“Please,” Lord Collins said. “Just for a little while. I promise that I shall not let anything happen to you.”

Nell was anxious, and she knew that he could read it in her face. She couldn't believe that he had returned to see her again so soon, but his request only left her feeling more overwhelmed than ever before.

"Where is Lord Comran? Would he not like to come as well? And with Mary?" she asked, trying to stall him before she really had to give any sort of final answer.

"I asked Lord Comran to come, but unfortunately, he had a last-minute delay in London. He was very grieved, but he has promised to come again as soon as possible so that he may see Mary again. But for today, I am asking if you would be willing to join me," he said.

"Why? Why are you so determined to get me away from my home right now?" Nell asked.

"Because I think that a young woman deserves a bit of freedom, and I am devastated that you are never afforded such a thing. If there is anything I can do to enable you the chance at freedom, to help you see a bit of the world around you, I shall do it," he said.

"By taking me into town?" she asked, thinking about the fact that her mother might see them, and she would be terribly angry at spotting her daughter with a man at all, much less a man of his rank.

"Well, not into Hartville, of course. I know that we could not do such a thing. I know that it would put you at risk of your mother's fury, and I should hate you to face such a thing. I never wish to get you into any trouble, nor do I wish to give your mother a poor impression of me.

I have not met her before, and I think that would be an awful way for us to meet for the first time. But if you trust me, there is another town to which I could take you,” he explained.

Although he had relieved her concerns about being caught by her mother, Nell still wasn't sure this was such a good idea. She had never been beyond Hartville. Until a few days ago, she had never gone into Hartville without her mother by her side.

And now, here she was, being asked to go to another town with a future earl? It was too much! How could she even take the time to consider it when she realised this was the sort of decision that she had always longed to be able to make?

This could be a day in which her life would change forever if she allowed it. That was the most frightening part of it all.

“I wish I had an answer for you, but I am not sure what to say,” she confessed.

“Then I must ask you this, Miss Hawkins. Do you want to spend the rest of your life here at this cottage? Do you want always to be subject to the whims and allowances of your mother only, or do you want to have a life? Do you want to know what it is to live freely and enjoy the world around you?

I should hate to be the one to urge you into disobedience, and that is not my goal. But I do grieve that you have spent your life stuck here without knowing what it is you are missing in the world around you,” he said.

Nell realised that he was speaking with compassion, but she was so confused that she wasn't sure how to respond, even after his passionate plea. There were so many risks at play, but she felt such a strong need to move forward, to take life into her own hands as she had always wished.

This was her chance. This was the day on which she could actually make a choice.

But only if she allowed it. Only if she gave herself permission. Only if she accepted that she was old enough now to make up her own mind and accept the consequences as they came.

And if she was sure of anything, she was sure of that. There would be consequences.

Nothing this wonderful came freely, and no one would simply let her go along in this dream in which she was living. One day, she would have no choice other than to wake up and know that she had been fighting for a life that would never be hers. But did that mean she could not live it in the meantime? Did that mean she had to put it all aside before she was ready?

"Very well," she finally said. "If you think this is the best thing, I would be delighted to join you in going to another town. But if we do, I must be back before four o'clock in the afternoon.

That would give me time to cook dinner and tidy up a bit before my mother returned, and she would never know that I had been gone all day. So if you can promise me that we will be back by four o'clock, I am happy to go."

“I promise,” he said in a rush. “I shall have you home in time. There is nothing that will delay us, and you will be here, and you can prove to your mother that you can see the world and still give her whatever she wishes of you.”

Nell took a deep breath and tried to accept that this was the decision she had made. In truth, she was utterly petrified, knowing that her mother could still find out, even if they took many precautions.

There was the chance that her mother might see them riding along the road or that she could have to make a trip to another town for some aspect of her work. Or that someone else they know might see Nell in town and go to her mother and mention it.

Yes, there were risks. But Nell was ready to accept them. This time, she knew that if her mother found out, she would take a deep breath and confess that she was falling in love and there was nothing that could stop it now. She may not be engaged to this man, but her affection had grown too strong. She wasn't going to give him up.

“Very well, do you know how to ride a horse?” Lord Collins asked.

Nell looked at him, wide-eyed. She slowly shook her head.

“I think they are beautiful, and I have seen them many times, but I have never ridden one. We walk everywhere,” she confessed.

Lord Collins smiled at her with an endearing gaze, and she knew that she was about to learn how to ride.

“I shall be the one holding the reins, and you will sit on the saddle and hold onto me. You needn’t worry. Everything will be perfectly safe,” he said.

She nodded, choosing to trust him even though it really was quite a frightening idea. She had always found horses to be stunning creatures, but they were also quite large, and she couldn’t imagine what it must be like to sit atop one and watch the world pass by beneath you, under those striking hooves.

“Now, allow me to help you mount,” Lord Collins said, leading Nell away from the cottage and towards his horse.

Nell turned back and looked at her home, taking in the sight of it. The quaint little house was surrounded by trees. Nell’s instruments could be seen through the windows. Flowers were springing up from all around, wildly and with determination. The stones that led to the porch were wobbly and uneven.

But it was home. Nell loved it, finding it beautiful and very comforting to her. Knowing that she was choosing to leave it at that moment in the hopes that she might have a wonderful day exploring another village with Lord Collins, it was like a dream.

But she would come back. As strange as it was to leave home, she held it in her heart that this place would still be here when she returned, and she would know that she was never going to be without a home. With that in mind, she took hold of the saddle and put her foot in the stirrup before pulling herself up. Lord Collins helped to push her up from the ground, and it was incredibly strange to have his hands assisting her. She blushed, embarrassed that he’d needed to give her any aid. But once she was up there, Nell had a whole new set of

worries and confusion.

It was not as frightening as she had anticipated, but she was still very uneasy, thinking that this was the most unique and wonderful experience she'd ever had. Although she wasn't quite sure what to do now, she hoped that Lord Collins would quickly join her up there and that he would lead them away with his confident ability to ride.

"Are you all right? You look wonderful, as though you have been riding your whole life," he said.

Nell laughed nervously.

"Are you sure of that? I feel terribly awkward up here. I am not sure what to do. Will you tell me?" she asked.

"You are fine. Just stay put. I am going to get him to walk first, just so you can get used to it. But we will need to pick up speed a bit once we get to the main road so that we may have enough time in town," he said.

Once more, Nell chose to trust Lord Collins. As the horse moved forward, she took a deep breath, easing into the rhythm of the steed's footsteps. It wasn't so bad, really. In fact, as they went along, she grew more and more comfortable, thinking that she had been a fool to ever doubt this or think that it was frightening.

Soon enough, they had reached the main road and began going a little bit faster. As they did so, Nell began to think about what all this meant. After all, it was not just her first horse ride. It was not just a trip to another town. All this was a sign that Lord Collins was just the hero Nell had needed, the man to show her the life she had always

dreamt about.

In many ways, he was there to rescue her. She hated to think of it that way. After all, her mother was a good woman, and she was only trying to protect Nell. But Nell was tired of it. She no longer wanted her mother's protection. She wanted this freedom. She wanted a life in which she could ride on horseback and enjoy the world around her. She wanted to see more.

And Lord Collins was helping her to do that. He was giving her the chance to know a part of herself she had never known before.

So often, Nell had longed for this very thing, but she had closed out those hopes. Now, she was free to indulge them. And all that was because of Lord Collins and how much he was looking after her.

He was helping her to know herself better, and that was exactly the sort of man any woman would hope to find. With all the uncertainties she faced, Nell still believed that this could be the one man in all the world who made her happy. And if he did something that remarkable, could she really consider letting him go?

Chapter 17

Seeing Miss Hawkins so happy was incredible, particularly when they finally raced at a gallop down the road. Henry thought he had never seen her smile this much in any of the times he had gone to visit her. Knowing that she was enjoying their time together this much, he felt somewhat overwhelmed and hopeful.

After all, what more could he want than this chance to make her laugh? What more could he want than this chance to be her source of joy?

He knew, deep down, that she was frightened and worried about what might come of this, but he was quite worried as well. Nevertheless, he had no intention of stopping or bringing any of this to an end. He needed Miss Hawkins to know that he thought about her more and more each day, and nothing could change that. Not even the realisation that their life together would be highly unlikely.

Henry was ready to fight for her. He was ready to fight to see that smile. No matter what, he couldn't let her fade away. He couldn't simply return her to that cottage and forget that she had changed his life forever.

"That was the most incredible thing. And when you made him run? When we were flying across the road? I never thought I would feel anything like that! It truly was as if we were soaring through the air!" Miss Hawkins exclaimed.

"I was shocked that you permitted me to show you and that you liked it so much. Most people are frightened their first time going that quickly on horseback," he noted.

“Well, I found it utterly remarkable,” she said.

Henry was just tying his horse at the town stable, and he gave the boy a few coins to watch over his steed. With that done, Henry was ready to take Miss Hawkins through the town and show her anything she wanted to see.

“Now, what sort of things do you enjoy when you do go into town? Do you like to go to the shops and look for pretty things? Or do you prefer getting tea and a bit of cake?” he asked.

She chewed the inside of her lip with indecision.

“I ought to clarify that we are going to get tea and cake no matter what. It is just a matter of when throughout our time here, and also, I would like to know which shops I ought to take you to,” he said.

“I cannot think where I might wish to go. I hardly ever have occasion to shop like this, and I have very little money anyway. So I suppose I could look for something, but even if I find nothing, it is quite all right,” she said.

“But there must be something you want,” Henry said.

“I am not sure what. I would like a new hinge for the door of my birdcage, now that I have another rescue. But that is something I may be able to configure on my own,” she said.

Henry eyed her for a moment, enjoying the priorities she had. He had never met another woman who preferred the idea of fixing the door of a birdcage over the thought of buying jewels and shoes and hairpins.

“Well, what if we put that idea aside for the moment? I am happy to indulge you and help you find a hinge if you need one, but I wish you to enjoy your day and think only about what you truly want.

Not what your birds need. Not what your mother needs. And honestly, not even what you need. I wish you to find something you *want*. Something you would otherwise not be able to have,” he told her.

She winced at that and looked at the ground.

“I fear that we do not all have money to spend on items we want, Lord Collins. Many of us must decide between the things we need, and I do very well to try and find ways of making what I need and want rather than spending money on them,” she said.

Henry smiled once more, still deeply impressed by her nature and that she felt this way. He couldn’t believe that a young woman would have such wisdom or that she would be so responsible.

But he still hadn’t made his point to the extent he wished. He needed her to understand that he was not giving her a chance to buy something for herself. He was giving her a chance for him to know what she wanted. He would be the one to get it for her.

“Miss Hawkins, if you would allow me to indulge in just one thing, I am asking because I wish to be able to purchase something for you. Even if it is just one thing, I want to treat you on this day that we have together.

I want to get you cake and tea, but I also want to get you ribbons and shoes and even jewels if that is what you wish,” he said, confident that she would never allow him to waste a fortune on such temporal things.

“My goodness, Lord Collins, I cannot imagine what you are thinking, but you mustn’t spend all that money on me. I am grateful, honestly, but you have to be more responsible than that,” she said.

Henry chuckled, amused that she had responded precisely how he expected.

“And you have to accept that this is not something I do often. I am doing this for you. Today. Just once so that I may have a bit of happiness of my own. If that bothers you, I am terribly sorry. But it would bring me great joy to see you happy and to see you wearing something I had the pleasure of buying for you,” he said.

Miss Hawkins blushed, which only made him happier. If she knew how much he thought of her, there was a chance that she could accept that his wishes to care for her and look after her were noble. But if she listened to her mother and refused to trust him, there were only going to be more hurdles ahead.

“Thank you, Lord Collins. I am not sure what I would be willing to accept from you with such generosity, but I am eager to spend the day out here, and I think that is enough of a gift,” she said.

Henry was unconvinced, but he decided to simply go along with her anyway, and they made their way through the town, enjoying all the sights. There were many women dressed in finery, likely wealthy women who lived without a title but had money from their families.

It was interesting to see them move along and how Miss Hawkins was clearly enamoured by them.

“Do you like her dress? I am sure we could go to the dressmaker and have something similar made for you,” he said.

“Oh, never!” she exclaimed. “I could never allow you to buy me a dress like that. And besides, my mother would most assuredly find out about you then. No, no. I cannot agree to something like that,” she insisted.

But as they continued walking, he noticed how her eyes lingered on the beautiful, sparkling items within the jewellery store. Watching her faint smile as they walked past, Henry had a feeling that she, like many other women, would like just a little token of beauty.

Still, he knew that she would not accept it if he took her into the shop at that moment and asked her to pick something out. Instead, he figured, he would need to go in and buy it on his own at some later time.

He would have to try and learn her preferences and taste before he could simply make such a purchase, but those were questions he was more comfortable asking.

“Did you see the comb in her hair?” he asked, once they had passed by another young woman who was dressed quite nicely.

“The one with the pearls? Yes, it was lovely,” she said. “At least, I thought it was. Why? Did you think otherwise? I know very little of fashion, obviously. Perhaps I am a fool.”

“Not a fool. Not at all. I asked you because I, too, thought it was lovely. But I think it would be lovelier on you,” he said.

She blushed once more and gave a simple shrug.

“I do not know about that, but you are very kind. I think the young woman who wore it did so with much grace, and I am content to simply have my hair as it is,” she said.

“Surely there must be some kind of jewellery that you like. Earrings? Bracelets? Necklaces?” he asked.

She laughed and shifted uncomfortably once more.

“I wish I had an answer for you, but it is possible that a woman such as myself knows nothing of gemstones and jewels. I am just a simple woman who has very little, and I am content with that. As much as I wish I could be so fine as they are, I am not, and that is all right,” she said.

It did not do much to help him discern how he could treat her to something special, but Henry decided that if she would not answer his questions about what she liked in terms of finery, at least he could show her more of the town.

At last, once they had gone to a few more shops and she had allowed him to buy her a few ribbons for her hair, they made their way to a teashop where they sat, and Henry ordered them each a piece of cake.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Do you like the cake?”

“It is perfectly delicious. I have never had cake this sweet before,” she replied.

“Yes, I do love plum cake. It is my favourite, actually. That is why I brought you here. I have come here before on business, and I knew that it was one of the best places to get this cake that I love so much,” he explained.

“You do business here?” she asked.

“Indeed. That is why I knew it was a good place for us to come,” he said.

“But what if you are seen? Surely you would not want to be found out with a woman of my station while you are here. Will you not be in terrible trouble for it?” she asked.

Henry had already thought about it and wondered himself what his father might say if he were seen. But Henry knew it was a very slim chance of being seen by their one and only business partner in town. And if he was? He would simply explain that this young woman had feelings for his friend, and he was speaking with her about the friend.

That way, if word got back to his father that Henry was seen in town with a young lady, Henry would lie to his father and say she was the woman related to a baron that he had already mentioned.

It was a convoluted lie, and Henry would hate to say something like that just to escape his father's wrath, but he still needed time to get his father used to the idea that Henry was coming to love a woman who wasn't like them. But the more time Henry spent with Miss Hawkins, the more delightful he found her.

Before long, he knew that his heart would be hers entirely. By then, whatever his father might say would no longer matter. And if the day came as soon as Henry anticipated, he could share with the whole world that he was falling in love with the instrument carver of Hartville.

Chapter 18

Henry sat with his father, eating dinner as they did together most nights when they were both in London, and neither was travelling. And, as usual, they were speaking about the one thing they shared in common.

The business.

“I just think Langford ought to understand that we have a profit to make, and if he wishes to charge us so much per chair, we will not be able to maintain working with him,” Henry’s father said.

“But you must understand that his work is in very high demand, Father. I work with the customers more than you do, and they are constantly asking for that man’s product. He has a family to feed, and he knows that his work is unmatched.

If he wishes to charge us a high value, what are we going to do? If we do not pay it, another company will,” Henry explained.

“Not if I share that he is a terror to work with and if I slightly exaggerate the rates so that others are too frightened to go near him. He shall have no choice but to sell on his own, and without a company such as ours, he cannot have even half the customers he does now. Nor even a quarter of them,” Henry’s father said, dramatizing everything as he so often did.

But the truth was, Mr. Langford truly would not be able to continue his work without them. He needed them to get his furniture into the

hands of the customers. And if Henry's father ruined his reputation over this little increase in prices, Mr. Langford's family would be destitute.

"You are too soft on these people, Henry. You need to understand they are simply trying to play a game with us. They all want a larger amount of money, but we are putting out all our work to ensure they can sell to begin with.

They would have nothing if we did not open the doors for them and have customers choose whose work they like best and want to have in their own homes," he continued.

"Yes, Father. I know. And, as I have mentioned before, I think that a good next step for us is to sell these instruments I told you about. If only you had heard them! I still cannot get that music out of my mind. I think our customers, once they are finished furnishing their homes, would be delighted to be amongst the first people to own these pieces," he said.

"Poppycock, Henry. We are not in the music business. I know nothing about instruments, and neither do you. Whatever has you thinking that this is a good idea, you must shut it away at once. I never wish to hear of it again," his father said.

"But why, Father? We are discussing business possibilities and ways we can grow. I only ask you because I do not understand why this is not an option for us," Henry said.

"It is not an option because it is not what we do. And did you not say that the inventor is a young woman?" his father asked.

“Well, yes. She is. But what has that to do with any of it?” Henry asked.

“I suppose that is my question, exactly. What has she said or done that has you so mesmerized that you would come to me and wish to sell what she has crafted?” his father asked.

Henry hated that his father was intuitive enough to consider this, even though Henry had already denied any feelings for her. He was all right with lying, for now, knowing that the truth would only make things worse in the short term.

But if he could slowly get his father used to the idea of her, that might be just what he needed to finally make his father see that she was a good woman, and she deserved their attention.

“Mesmerized? You did not hear the music. I suppose it was mesmerizing enough, but I am only asking because I know that we could make a grand profit. And the young woman would not ask for so much as Mr. Langford.

In fact, I think the margin we could earn on her instruments might even fill the gap created by the higher rate for Mr. Langford’s products,” Henry touted, hoping that this would tempt his father.

“You are doing a fine job of trying to manipulate me, boy, but I will not fall for it. I know that you want me to buy the instruments this young woman makes and that you think we ought to sell them, but it is not the right thing for us.

People buy furniture so they have a fine place to sit or stand or set their things on. They do not buy an instrument for those reasons,” his

father argued.

“Even if the instrument is so stunning that it could be an art piece unto itself? You have not seen them, Father. I assure you that you would change your mind if only you had a chance to take a look and see what it is that I keep telling you about. You would see with your own eyes that I am right, that I am telling you all this because they really are that incredible,” Henry said, trying harder than ever to convince his father.

But his efforts were wasted. His father simply sighed and took a sip of his brandy, clearly bored by the subject altogether.

“She is a young woman, correct?” he asked again.

Henry swallowed and nodded slowly.

“Yes, Father. She is a young woman,” he confirmed.

“And that is what worries me most, Henry. I do not wish to hear that you are developing feelings for this young woman and that you wish to make something of her because of it. I do not understand why you are going on and on about these instruments, but this would certainly answer it. If you care for her, and if you think that she is, somehow, important to you.

That would be reason enough, I suppose, for you to tell me time and time again that I must consider her and the instruments that she makes,” his father said.

“Whatever do you mean, Father?” he asked with a scoff.

“I mean that I can see a lovestruck young man when he is before my eyes. You care for her, do you not? You like her. You think that she might even be worthy of you?” his father asked mockingly.

“Father—”

“Well, Henry, you are wrong. She is unworthy of you. You are a fool if you think anything could ever happen between you and this young woman because you are of noble blood, and that makes you special to this kingdom. It means that you do not need to go around with the riffraff, pretending that you can care about them or that you are worth as little as they are,” he growled.

“I do not know what you mean, Father. I was only speaking about the business,” Henry insisted, willing to say anything to make his father stop. He couldn’t bear to listen to this cruelty, to hear his father say these things about Miss Hawkins and others like her. It was more than just uncomfortable. In many ways, it was painful.

“I will never allow my son to fall in love with someone who is just a country peasant, a little thing who does not deserve his attention. And you must remember that I built this business from nothing.

I will not leave it in the hands of a young man who makes his decisions based upon his emotions from day to day. You are supposed to inherit this from me one day, but I can ensure that never happens if I find you untrustworthy. Do you understand, Henry?”

The room was silent, and Henry felt the pain of tension building around them. He didn't want to answer. He didn't want to acknowledge his father's arrogance or how awful he was. But there was nothing more he could do and nothing more he could say. He had to accept that this was what his father believed, and Henry couldn't change that.

"I understand, Father. It grieves me that you should think so little about people, even ones your son has merely met in passing, even ones with great talent. But I understand that this is how you feel about the matter, and you have the final say as to what our business does here on.

And I wish you to trust me. I hope that I can prove to you that I am worthy of that trust, that I am capable of doing what you wish and achieving more than you ever dreamt of from me," Henry said.

It was difficult to get the words out. He wanted his father to think of the financial aspect, and he knew there was only one thing left he could say.

"I realise your fears about my potential affections are greater than your desire to make a profit through a financial investment; that is your decision. I only hope that you are not passing on an opportunity that our competition accepts.

I hope that we do not live to regret that we had this chance and did not take it because you were paranoid that your son might develop feelings for a woman you see as unfit for our family," he said, keeping the words steady and flat for his father to think about without any further emotion.

Henry could see that he had succeeded. His father was finally considering it. He clearly realised that he might be missing out. This was the temptation Henry had hoped for, and he decided to leave the conversation with that, not bothering to say anything more that could potentially ruin the success he'd brought about.

"These potatoes are wonderful," Henry said. "Miss Klein, could you bring more, please?"

With the conversation ended, they ate the rest of their meal in silence, and Henry left his father alone. After the meal, Henry went out to the small garden in the back, behind the townhouse. He stood under the stars and looked up, wondering if Miss Hawkins was currently looking up at the sky as well. He wished he could be with her.

In truth, he felt a bit guilty. He'd found himself ready to lie about his feelings for her if the need were to arise. But he was doing so because he needed to keep her safe and he needed more time. If he readily gave in and shared the truth with his father, it would only be a greater risk to Miss Hawkins. She was more likely to be called out as a temptress or some other nonsense.

And that was something from which he was desperate to protect her. Henry just wanted to see her again, and this was only making it harder to be apart. Henry knew he would have to find an excuse to go to Hartville as soon as possible.

And when he realised that he could speak with another man in town about Mr. Langford, it was the perfect opportunity to leave the following morning without his father suspecting a thing.

Henry hoped that the days of sneaking around like this would soon be behind him, but until that happened, he would just keep pressing forward, hoping the day would come soon when he could tell Miss Hawkins how he really felt about her.

He could confess that he was falling for her. And he could tell her that he was ready to give up anything to be with her. He only needed a little more time to prepare his father. And then?

Well, then it would be her decision. Would she come with him? Would she love him in return? Or would she remain subject to her mother until the end of time?

Chapter 19

“Thank you for allowing me to come with you this time,” Daniel said as they rode closer to the fork in the road.

“Of course. I wish you had managed to come when I came last, but I know that you were busy with work,” Henry replied.

“I am eager to go and see Mary. It feels as though it has been forever since that day when I first met her. I just want to be near her again, to know if I was right and we truly had a ... oh, what would you call it? A connection of sorts? It certainly felt as though there was something between us,” Daniel said.

“Of course there was something between the two of you. Miss Hawkins and I both noted it,” Henry said, glad that his friend was going to have another chance to see the woman he had liked so much before.

“Well, I hope that you and Miss Hawkins have a nice time together. I see the turn up ahead, and I should be going,” Daniel said.

Henry smiled, knowing that turn well by now.

“Enjoy your time with Mary,” Henry replied before moving forward and taking the left that would lead him straight to the cottage.

By the time he reached it, his heart was racing with excitement over the chance to see her again. And when the cottage was in view, and

he saw her in the usual spot, just sitting on the stones leading up to the porch, stringing an instrument, he felt a wave of affection rush through his veins.

“Miss Hawkins,” he said softly, dismounting from the usual distance and tying his horse.

“Lord Collins,” she said in a bright voice, setting down the instrument and standing to come and greet him.

“I hope you do not mind that I have returned so soon. Daniel wished to see Mary and that meant that I had another chance to come here and see you,” he told her, clinging to the excuse.

“I am glad for it,” she replied, her eyes sparkling on the warm, sunny day. She wore a simple, ivory dress with little blue flowers printed on it. Henry tried not to stare but found it very difficult when his eyes were always drawn to her.

“Well, I would invite you to come to town with me again, but I do believe we should take some time here today if you do not mind too much. Although I know it would be good for you to go out more, and it will be easier as you have practice, I really would like to see your instruments today,” he said.

“Yes, of course. Please, have a seat, and you may look at anything you like,” she said, handing him the Belute.

“Thank you,” he said, sitting down and looking the instrument over as he had many times before. He then traded it for the Rommal and then the Bower. These were clearly her three favourite instruments of the thirteen she had made, but he wanted to see others as well.

“I have recreated each of them, as you can see. I thought you might wish to compare the originals with the newer ones so that you may tell me anything that appears inconsistent to your eyes,” she said.

He looked them over as he had before but saw only perfection in each step.

“I think you have done a marvellous job. I would really like to see some of the other things you have made. And I would like to know what you wish to do with them in the future,” he said.

She nodded but was clearly intimidated by that question.

“I shall go and get a few more for you,” she said.

After a moment, Miss Hawkins returned and handed him a few other creations.

“This is a Moragon, and this one is a Dunan. They were some of the earliest inventions I came up with, but I am still pleased with them,” she said.

“Interesting,” he replied, noting the way the Moragon snaked a pipe around in a circle.

“It is a reeded instrument, so you can see the cut in the wood here

where it fits in, more like a bagpipe, I suppose,” she said.

“Lovely,” he replied. “And I hope you do not mind that I have many questions today about your instruments. I spoke with my father and ... he is not yet ready to jump at the chance to sell, but I think I am finally helping him see the benefit of adding them to our collection of items.

I really do think he will soon understand the good it would do us if we sold what you are making. It isn’t as though all the other companies are selling anything like this. It would make us unique.”

“Yes, I suppose. But if it is not a good fit, I think it would be mistake,” she replied.

Henry didn’t want to hear her say that. He wanted her to be excited. He wanted Miss Hawkins to be eager to work with him and put her instruments in his hands to sell and make her a fortune. Moreover, he wanted her to trust him, which still seemed to be difficult to gain. She was still uncertain about him. That made him ache, much to his dismay.

“I think this would absolutely fit our company,” he said.

She chewed her lip with uncertainty, and he realised this was about more than just the company and his father’s feelings about selling instruments. Something more was bothering her. But then, Henry remembered that another time something had been bothering her as well. And something else had been grating at him.

He was starting to realise that they were never at peace, even when they were happy together. There was always something in the way, and he wanted nothing more than the chance to fight back and insist

that this was the future he wanted, and he was going to make it happen.

“Please, tell me what is on your mind? I am always sad to see you like this, to see you anxious,” he said.

“You must forgive me. I do not mean to be so dour all the time. It is just that I am not sure what to think of it all. I know nothing about your business or your father, and that is all right because I know you, and I think I can trust you. But I know that a great deal of complexity is involved in any arrangement that would lead us to work together on this. I fear what might happen if things go awry,” she said.

“What could go awry?” he asked.

“I cannot say. It could be your father is displeased with my work. Or my mother is angry that I ever agreed to this in the first place. Or the instruments simply do not sell, and no one likes them. Perhaps I am a fool for even thinking they are good to begin with,” she said.

“You are not a fool. You have done something amazing with these. I am still astonished by your abilities, Miss Hawkins. I would not lie to you about that,” Henry said, hoping to reassure her.

But still, she was uneasy. He didn’t know what more to say, but if he could just get her to realise that she was on to something, that she had done very well in what she had made, perhaps that was all he really needed her to know for now.

“Well, if you really think this is good for you and the company, I would still be willing to sell them, but only if you truly think it is a

wise idea. I should hate to learn that your father is unhappy with the decision at a later time," she said.

"No, indeed, I think my father is finally beginning to consider it and realise that we would be making a very good investment. In time, he will understand the great benefit of it all," he said.

Henry reached for one of the other instruments, whose name she had not yet told him. But at that same instant, Miss Hawkins had reached for it, and now, Henry's hand lingered upon hers. He knew that he ought to pull away, but he could not.

And when he realised that she had not pulled away either, Henry wondered if this was the sign he had been hoping for all along. Maybe this moment was all he'd needed to know without a doubt that this was the woman he could truly love for the rest of his days.

He didn't tell her at that moment that he loved her, but he was growing more and more fascinated by her. He really did think this could be love and that thought both frightened and thrilled him. If this was love, it was beautiful.

And if it was not? Then it was still utterly remarkable, and he imagined love music to be something truly miraculous if it was even better than this.

Miss Hawkins laughed nervously, and they both slowly let go of the instrument, their hands separating and leaving an ache in their wake.

"I am sorry for that," she said. "I wanted you to see the Farlane, but it

would seem that you had the same thought.”

“Farlane? It is another striking instrument, but I am becoming accustomed to that by now. You never cease to amaze me with your work. And this has only three strings?” he asked.

Miss Hawkins dove into her explanation and played the same song as she always did when she showed him an instrument for the first time. She plucked the strings with ease and then strummed when necessary as well. He let the music soothe him, and in many ways, Henry was starting to drift into another world.

It was a world wherein he was not accountable to his father or his station but to this woman who made him feel alive as he had never felt before.

“I hope you are not disappointed with any of them. If you wish, you may take one of the replicas and get a feel for it. You may have some better ideas about whether it is a good fit if you really have the chance to try it out,” she told him.

Henry’s heart beat a little faster, intimidated by that idea. He was petrified that he might break something or cause a problem. But her suggestion made sense. Moreover, it would give him a chance to show his father.

“Shall I take two for the moment? But first, you must show me how to play at least a few notes,” he said, hoping his father would be moved by the sound of the instruments, something Henry could not produce without Miss Hawkins first tutoring him.

“Very well. You must take the Belute because it shall travel with ease. And it is also rather simple to play. Here, take this one, and I shall

show you how to play on here,” she said, taking the other. Miss Hawkins helped him place his fingers correctly and then trained him on the proper way to expel air to get the instrument’s deep, soothing sound.

Henry was amazed that he had managed to accomplish it and that he was even making it sound decent. And when she showed him how to play a few notes, he was certain that he could convince his father to take a closer look at this. And maybe then, if he was careful, he could slowly introduce the idea of Miss Hawkins as the woman who had stolen his heart.

Chapter 20

Nell ached to spend more time with Lord Collins. Watching him learn her instruments was fun and exciting, and it only moved her to care more deeply for him.

He was starting to come as often as he possibly could. Every week, he would visit her for three or four days. Sometimes it would only be a short visit before he had to go and see one of his father's business partners, but other times, he would stay for hours.

"How have you managed to convince your father that you need to be in Hartville this often?" she asked.

"We actually have an issue with one of our suppliers who has increased his prices. My father is glad that I am here and addressing the issue by trying to reason with him. Of course, I am actually advocating for the man and trying to convince my father that the request is not a foolish one, but that is just a part of it.

I have also been visiting some of the other villages, but I always ensure I have time to get back here to see you before I leave," he explained.

"I am glad that you do. And it is a relief that you can come and visit so much," she said.

"I worry that I am stopping you from your efforts in making and playing music. Have I caused you any troubles in that you have less time to work on your craft?" he asked.

Nell laughed, shaking her head. She didn't need more time for the instruments. Music was all around her now. She never felt as though it was missing or lacking. She just wanted to be with Lord Collins, and she was often able to play music with him. Now that she was teaching him both the Belute and the Farlane, it seemed he was more invested than ever in their friendship.

Now and then, Lord Comran and Mary would join them, but Nell had noted the way those two looked at each other and was unsurprised they often preferred to spend time on their own. Mary was hopeful that Lord Comran's courtship would soon turn into an engagement, and Nell was certain it was only a matter of time.

As for Nell, she was always glad when her mother was in town to sell the pies she made or whatever else had been requested. It meant that Nell had plenty of time to spend with Lord Collins and could continue getting to know him better. She hoped that, soon enough, they would find a way to express any feelings they each had. For her part, she knew they were only growing deeper.

Although he still mentioned selling her instruments, Nell was sure that it was not his primary reason for seeing her. She did not have to know much about men to understand that he was coming to see her. The music and the work, it was all just an afterthought.

"Here," Nell said, fixing the position of his hand to play a new chord on the Farlane. He was struggling with his dexterity to get it right. It was raining outside, and Nell had, for the first time, invited Lord Collins indoors.

It had made her nervous, knowing that a young woman was not supposed to do such a thing. But she was unwilling to make him sit out there, and she couldn't get her instruments wet, so it was the only option they had.

But just as she got his hand in place, Nell heard a noise outside. Someone was at the house!

“Is that Lord Comran?” she asked in a whisper.

“He didn’t come today. Could it be Mary?”

“She is visiting her aunt in Chester,” Nell said, her heart racing with fear and her skin prickling at the realisation that it could only be her mother.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It is my mother. Hurry! You must leave. Out the back. You have to go into the trees, and you can stay hidden and make your way back to where your horse is tied. Go! Quickly!” she ordered in a harsh whisper.

Lord Collins grabbed his boots and jacket and raced to the back of the house to the door that led from the kitchen out to the garden. He was gone just in time for Nell’s mother to come in through the front.

Nell sat in the parlour, waiting and listening to the silence with nothing but the patter of rain echoing. She hoped she would not hear the sound of her mother screaming upon seeing a man. But when her mother came to the parlour, she was smiling and drying her hair with a cloth.

“There is a good deal of rain out there. I could not stay for long in the marketplace. They have not yet set up the tents overhead to stop us from getting wet. The rain was unexpected,” she said casually.

“Oh, I am sorry, Mother. You must be sad you were unable to stay longer and sell more,” Nell said.

“It hardly matters. I was cold actually. I feared that I might get ill if I was out much longer, and it was a good thing that I left when I did. Besides, now I get to sit here with you, by the fire and with ...tea ...”

Nell looked up, wide-eyed at her mother. She realised that her mother had spotted the very suspect thing on the table.

Two teacups. Not just one. Not only Nell's. But another. Someone else had been there, and it was too late to hide the evidence.

“Who came by?” her mother asked. “You have two cups there.”

“It was Mary,” Nell said in a rush.

“Mary?”

“Yes, of course. Who else would it have been? She came around to see me, and we had a cup of tea,” Nell said.

“I thought Mary was visiting family out of the village?” her mother

asked, crossing her arms and cocking her head to the side. It was clear that she was suspicious of Nell at that moment, and Nell's heart was still pounding in her chest as she sat there, terrified of her mother learning the truth.

"Oh, yes. She came home early. She learned that another aunt was ill, so she came to get something before setting out again to see the other aunt," Nell said, hoping that would cover for the fact that Mary would still be gone for another week.

"Strange. Why would she not rush straight to see her ailing aunt if she was so worried?" Nell's mother pressed, raising an eyebrow.

"I believe Mary had something here she needed to get for her. I am not sure what it was, and I did not ask," Nell replied.

"But Mary did not leave right away? She took time for tea?"

"She said she did not wish to leave in the middle of the rain, and it was best she wait for it to clear up tomorrow," Nell said.

But she could tell her mother did not believe her entirely. She continued to press with question after question to try and find Nell's lie.

"How odd that she would fear the rain to get to an ill family member, but the rain was not enough to stop her from coming to see you here and have tea. I suppose Mary really is a good friend if she placed you as such a high priority that she could not bear to spend another day apart from you before she sets out again," Nell's mother said, her tone clearly disbelieving.

“That is precisely the sort of friend she is. I am thankful for her! It is just a shame that you did not get to see her. She left only a short time ago. You did not pass her on the road?” Nell asked, still trying to spin it as best she could to make the story believable.

“No, I did not. I would have remembered had I seen her. I did, however, see a horse tied to a tree, but I imagined that it must belong to Mr Sanderson. I wanted to speak with him about it as I have never seen him leave one of his horses there,” her mother said.

“Oh, how strange. Perhaps he left the horse, or maybe he had a visitor. Why would he leave the horse nearer to us?” Nell asked, feigning her own disbelief.

Her mother peered closely at Nell, slightly narrowing her eyes as she searched for the truth.

“Well, darling, that is a very good question. I am certain that I shall find an answer soon enough,” she said.

Nell smiled and gave an innocent nod, hoping her mother could not see the fear that coursed through her veins.

“Very well. Now, would you like me to make you something to eat? Or some tea since you have been walking in the rain? I would not want you catching a chill from your time outside,” Nell said, looking for an excuse to escape the conversation.

“Yes, I suppose. Tea would be good. And if there is anything other than my pies for us to eat, I would be delighted. I feel as though I have not eaten a vegetable in days,” her mother groaned.

Nell laughed. She was in firm agreement with her mother. After a week of selling out every last one of her goods, Nell's mother had been distressed to find that all the extras she had made were not being purchased at all, and now the two of them were eating the pies constantly so they would not go to waste.

But that day, her mother had pulled back, and it meant they could indulge in the other foods they had stored up.

Busying herself in the kitchen, Nell was glad to keep her mother distracted and change her focus. But Nell knew that it was only a matter of time before her mother would push for the truth, and Nell merely hoped it was not that day. She hoped her mother would choose, instead, to get some rest.

In the meantime, Nell would have to think of better excuses and better ways of protecting Lord Collins from being discovered. He seemed more and more interested in Nell day after day, and it could not go on like this forever.

Nell feared her mother's story repeating itself. What if the spell broke once they told their parents? What if Lord Collins changed? What if he gave up on a future with Nell, and then she would have to admit to her mother that she had been a fool? Her mother could be right, after all. It was easy to fall in love. But trust? That was something else entirely.

Nell cleared away the teacups when she brought the fresh tea to her mother and then spent more time on her own, preparing a decent dinner for the two of them. She was afraid, worried that she wouldn't be able to hide much longer, that her mother would discern the truth.

But if she lived in this fear forever, everything was bound to fall apart, and Nell couldn't take that.

She needed to have hope for the future. She needed to remember life beyond these walls. And she needed to believe that Lord Collins wanted what was best for her. He was the one who had rescued her, after all. And yet, now, when she had a chance to tell her mother the truth, Nell was scared.

It didn't seem right. This should have been a good moment, an opportunity. Instead, it was only another chance for things to fall apart.

Would they ever turn out for good? Would Nell ever be able to tell her mother that she was falling in love with an earl?

Chapter 21

“Thank you again for bringing me along this time. I was dreadfully grieved when I could not join you the last time you came,” Daniel said to Henry as they drew nearer to the cottage.

“I told you I bring you whenever I was able. And I am certain that Mary will be happy that you have come as well. She certainly seems to care about you,” Henry replied with a sly smile.

As the two men rode beside one another, they took the final turn to see the cottage. There, sitting outside, Mary and Miss Hawkins were laughing at something, and Henry was so taken aback by the beauty and joy on Miss Hawkins’s face that his voice caught in his throat, making it impossible for him to speak.

As he and Daniel approached, the young women looked up, and both smiled. Mary looked desperately eager, whereas Miss Hawkins appeared anxiously excited.

“Good morning, ladies,” Daniel greeted before Henry had a chance to speak aloud.

“And good morning to you both. To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?” Mary asked.

“We thought that you both may like to join us for an outing. Perhaps a visit into town would be nice for the four of us,” Daniel replied.

Henry glanced at Miss Hawkins, who looked back at him with a knowing smile. Like him, it was clear that she appreciated the

opportunity to let Daniel and Mary carry the conversation and lead into the day together.

“And what is it that you intend us to do today? You know that Eleanor and I are proper young women, even if we aren’t as fancy and titled as yourselves,” Mary said with a gently teasing challenge in her tone. It was strange to hear Miss Hawkins referred to by her given name this way. Both formal and familiar at the same time.

“And it is a proper day you shall have. You need never worry about our intentions when it comes to the likes of you two. I think you shall find that we are most gentlemanly,” Daniel reassured her.

“Very well, I am glad to hear it. In that case, Nell? What do you say? Shall we join them?” Mary asked.

Henry looked at Miss Hawkins with hope, sensing Daniel and Mary doing the same. If she was to be the deciding voice, that made all the difference.

“I would be perfectly delighted,” she replied with a grin.

Henry exhaled in relief and moved alongside her as they prepared to ride off together on their way to Mariswood, a larger village nearby. As Miss Hawkins mounted the horse to ride with him—and Mary to ride with Daniel—Henry couldn’t help feeling as though it was a sign of things to come.

This was precisely what he wanted with the woman he would eventually marry.

He would want to take her on adventures, to indulge in the excitement of life. He would want to enjoy the beauty of the world that surrounded them and the thrill of knowing they were together, no matter the cost.

Of course, he would have to find a way around the many obstacles that faced them before that could ever happen. First, he would have no choice but to confront his father and beg her mother. Until he had done that, there was very little reason to expect these things.

But Henry pushed the thought aside. He didn't want to sully the day with hopelessness just because the odds were against them. He needed to trust and believe that they really could have the life they wanted. At least, *he* wanted it. It seemed that Miss Hawkins wanted it as well, but he would have to wait and see if his suspicions were correct.

They made it to Mariswood within the hour and started wandering around the town. Mary took Miss Hawkins's hand and led her off and away. Daniel and Henry watched them, walking behind with an easy gait, knowing they were both completely happy.

"Although Mary has a good deal more freedom than Miss Hawkins, she is still very excitable when she is allowed to venture away from home," Daniel noted.

"Yes, I can see that," Henry agreed. But his eyes were on Miss Hawkins as Mary led her to the window of a jewellery shop. They gazed at the items inside, and Henry tuned his ear to listen while he and Daniel stood a short distance away.

“Which do you like best?” Mary asked.

“It is a very hard choice, but I think the silver bracelet there, the one with the three sapphires,” Miss Hawkins replied.

“Ooh, that is lovely. I think I want the whole shop.” Mary giggled as she replied.

“Well, I think it is folly for us to even dream about it. Come, perhaps we can find a sweet cake?” Miss Hawkins said, urging Mary away for something a good deal more practical.

“I see your thoughts turning round and round,” Daniel noted, eyeing him.

“Did you hear her?” Henry asked.

“No, I was looking at the boots in the window there. They would be fine for a hunt. I may need to come back and speak with the cobbler,” Daniel replied.

“Would you mind taking them to buy a nice treat, and I shall come and meet you? Tell them that I need to speak with a tailor, but I shall join you all soon,” Henry said.

“Oh? You have something secret to do?”

“She liked a bracelet in the shop window. I have been trying to find a

small token of my affection, which is the best chance I have found. Will you just stay with them, so they do not ask about me?" Henry begged.

"Certainly. Get her whatever you wish because it is clear that the two of you belong together. She needs something to remember that," Daniel said, giving him a nod of understanding.

With that, Daniel departed, and Henry watched him join the young women and lead them away. Quickly, Henry darted inside the jewellery shop and was immediately greeted by the shop's owner.

"And what may I help you with?" the man asked, looking greedily at Henry in his finery.

Henry hoped he would get an honest price and that the man would not take advantage of him. In the end, he was fortunate that it seemed to be the case and the shop owner sold him the bracelet without any difficulties. He wrapped it in a nice little fabric box, and Henry took it as he handed over the money.

"Thank you," Henry said. "You have made a young woman very happy today."

"Well, that is a delight to hear. I do hope that you look after her," the shop owner said.

"That is precisely what I intend to do."

With that, Henry departed and made his way to the small teashop where he saw Daniel with Miss Hawkins and Mary, seated and eating sweet cake and sipping their tea with delight. Henry joined them at the table and smiled casually.

“Did you find what you needed from the tailor?” Miss Hawkins asked.

“Oh, indeed. He fixed the button on my sleeve in a hurry,” Henry lied.

“Excellent. Now, you must try this cake. It is absolutely delicious,” Daniel said, moving along the conversation so Henry would not have to lie any further.

They spent some time there, just resting and enjoying themselves, but Henry knew they could not remain much longer. It was important to get Miss Hawkins back home before her mother discovered she was missing. Moreover, Henry knew that every time he was out with Miss Hawkins, he risked being seen by an acquaintance of his father’s.

Many of those men enjoyed coming to the smaller villages where they could get a rest from the busyness of London. If they saw him with Miss Hawkins, there would be hell to pay.

Then again, he felt that it was absolutely worth it.

“Is there anything more you wish to do before we return home?” Henry asked Miss Hawkins and Mary.

“I would like to pay a quick visit to that shop over there,” Mary said

eagerly.

Henry and Daniel followed the other two, and Daniel looked at him with a satisfied expression on his face.

“Thank you again for bringing me. I know I have not spent much time with her, but I have quickly fallen in love,” Daniel said, eyeing Mary as she laughed at something Miss Hawkins had said.

“I understand. Better than you know,” Henry replied.

“Yes, I suppose you do. And, as it happens, I intend to pursue a formal courtship with her. I hope you do not mind. I know that it will be difficult for you to do the same with Miss Hawkins, and I simply hope that you are not angry with me for this,” Daniel said.

“Why would I be angry?” Henry asked. “That is wonderful news.”

“I think so as well. I have already begun speaking with my mother about it. She does not fully approve of the idea, but she is finally coming around. And since I have no father to stop me ... I cannot help but move forward. I would do nearly anything to be with her,” Daniel said.

While it was true that they scarcely knew one another, Henry trusted that Daniel and Mary would be happy as time progressed. He hoped for his friend's sake that they would. The two were very much alike in humour and joy. There was something about them that simply fell into place.

Henry and Miss Hawkins were very different from one another, but he didn't mind that. In many ways, she was showing him parts of himself that he had never known existed, and that was quite exciting as well. He wondered what more she had to teach him about himself, and Henry longed to see it whenever he was able.

"I am excited for you, Daniel. I have no doubt that Mary will accept your proposal when the time comes. And I am sure that her mother and father shall heartily approve. Your own mother is a kind woman, and she would most certainly accept your marriage," Henry said.

"I think so as well. Once she is comfortable with the fact that I am going to do this, I think she will be accepting of her and care for her as much as I do," Daniel said.

"You deserve nothing but the greatest happiness, and I am delighted that you are going to have it," Henry reiterated.

Henry placed a hand on Daniel's back in a brotherly gesture as they continued forward, chatting about Daniel's plans. It was certainly a wonder that he should proceed so quickly, but Henry knew he would do the same if given the chance. He wanted to marry Miss Hawkins more than anything.

And while he grieved that his father would never allow him to do what Daniel was doing, he was determined that he would find a way. And when he did, he would never let Miss Hawkins down or let her go. They would be happy. And wasn't that all he could ask for

Chapter 22

Mary was saying goodbye to Lord Comran as Lord Collins smiled sadly and took Nell's hand in his own.

"I must confess that it gets more difficult to say goodbye every time I leave here," he said, melting her heart with his words.

"Indeed, it is very difficult whenever you go," she admitted.

"Well, it is a very small token of what I feel, but I wish to leave you with something by which you may remember me when I am gone," Lord Collins said.

Nell was surprised by this and wondered what he could have for her that he would leave behind. Moreover, she thought it was nonsense. It was not as if she could truly forget him when he left. Never. He was too important to her to stop thinking of him for even a moment.

But Lord Collins rooted around in his pack and smiled as he handed her a small box covered in fabric. She looked at it with surprise and took it when he handed it to her.

"What is this?" she asked, hesitant to open the gift.

"It is just something I thought you may like," Lord Collins replied.

Nell slowly opened the gift and, instantly, her eyes widened with shock as she gasped. She couldn't believe what was before her eyes! It was the silver bracelet with the sapphires that she had seen in Mariswood that day. How had he known? Had he been listening to her? And how could he spend such a fortune on a gift like this?

"I cannot believe this. You bought me this gift? I am utterly shocked. I never imagined that I would have something so beautiful," she said in a rush.

"It really is the least I could do for you, Miss Hawkins. You deserve only the loveliest of gifts, and this was something small I was able to purchase for you. I only wish that I could have done more," he said.

"No, you could not have done more. This is incredible. It is so beautiful. But how did you know? Did you hear me speaking with Mary?"

Nell looked him in the eye and noted how he blushed with embarrassment for having apparently listened in on her conversation with Mary about the jewellery. But Nell didn't mind. She was so grateful for this stunning gift that she simply didn't know what to say.

"I am at a loss for words," she told him.

"Then I suspect that you truly do like it. That was all I could have hoped for. You deserve something truly beautiful, something that ... something like you," he said, softly.

Once more, Nell was overcome. She couldn't believe that he was speaking to her so sweetly or that he really thought so kindly towards her. It felt as though everything she could ever have wanted was falling into place.

Lord Collins was more than she'd ever imagined he would be. More than any other man could be. And in her heart, all she wanted was to be near him. Always.

"You are far too kind, Lord Collins. I wish I could say that I understand your niceties, but in truth, it is something of a mystery to me. I cannot comprehend why you would always be so ... so giving. So generous. You are unlike any man I have ever known, and certainly nothing like the noblemen my mother has spoken of," Nell confessed.

"Perhaps your mother knew only one man, and she made unnecessary judgements against him. But there are many men like me, Miss Hawkins. I am not unusual. I am just a man, and I would be delighted to change your opinion of nobles," he said with a wide grin.

Nell sighed happily. She wished to wear the bracelet whenever she wanted but knew there would be no such pleasure. She would have to hide it from her mother.

Nevertheless, Nell would never forget about the wonderful kindness of this gift or what she believed it really meant. After all, Lord Collins was hardly even hiding the fact that he liked her. It was clear that he thought well of her and thought she was worth his time. It was possible even that he cared for her more deeply than just viewing her as a simple woman in the woods.

"Lord Collins, regardless of my mother's feelings and the choices she has made in her life, I do hope you know that I think very well of you. I find you to be an astonishing gentleman with a kind heart and a

good and decent respect for others,” Nell said, holding back on the other thing she wished to say.

“It is more than that, Miss Hawkins. I am sure you can see by now that this is not simply a gesture of kindness as you have said. This is a sign of my affection,” he said as if he had been holding back from saying the word until now.

Affection. That was a very proper way to put it. But for Nell, it was just confirmation of what she had been hoping for. He really did care for her. He thought well of her. He held her in high regard.

This was everything Nell had hoped for, and she was delighted by the prospect of his care, but that still did not change their circumstances, and she was frightened by the idea that it might only further cause them pain. After all, what was a woman to do when the man she cared for most in the world was the exact epitome of what her mother feared?

At that moment, with her eyes locked on Lord Collins’s gaze, Nell thought she could be lost forever with him. She wanted to tell him that she loved him, that she cared deeply for him, that he was everything she could have hoped for.

But it was impossible.

Remaining silent on those deep, hopeful feelings, Nell ensured that she would not be put in such a challenging position as defying her mother. Moreover, she could not allow herself to be the first to declare love of any sort. She simply needed to let go.

“If I may be so bold, I would like to put the bracelet on your wrist,” he said, interrupting her thoughts for a moment far more important.

It truly was bold of him and rather forward. But Nell held out her hand and returned the box to him so that he could clasp the bracelet around her wrist where it sat, daintily adorning Nell as though it was always meant to be there.

“What do you think? Do you like it?” he asked gently.

“I think it is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” Nell replied, being as honest as she could.

“No,” Lord Collins replied. “Not the most beautiful.”

Again, their eyes held. For a long moment, she did not merely see him but felt him. She sensed the depths of his thoughts, the extent of pains from the past, the hopes for the future. There was so much within that gaze. And Lord Collins ever so slightly leaned forward, alerting Nell to the fact that he was coming closer to kiss her.

She stood firm, not moving away or shying from the gesture. But she knew, in her heart, that it would be a mistake to allow it. And before she had a chance to refuse, it seemed that Lord Collins thought better of it as well. He paused for a moment before gently pulling back with a smile of longing.

“I have always wanted to remain a gentleman,” Lord Collins said, clearing his throat.

“And that is why anyone would respect you. Your nature defines you

as a good, noble man. It has nothing to do with titles, you know,” Nell said, hopeful that he would understand.

“I am glad that you think so. I do hope you know that I am not always inclined to be selfless when I am around you, but it is my respect for you that leads me to be,” he said.

Nell understood the code in which his words were spoken. He was confessing how badly he wanted to kiss her, but how strongly he knew that such a thing must be saved. He was admitting that he wanted to toss propriety aside, but he could not put her in a circumstance where her virtue could be questioned.

It was a remarkable thing for a man with so much power to refuse the opportunity to use it.

“I am grateful for how you choose to take care and show caution, Lord Collins. I simply wish that we could have more time to discuss it, more time to ... to understand one another and our expectations of this friendship,” Nell said.

“Friendship. Of course. And as your friend, I would not have you getting into trouble with your mother,” he said with a sigh. “I suppose I must convince Daniel that we need to depart. But I shall come back as soon as I am able.”

“I look forward to it, Lord Collins,” she said.

“Until then ...”

With that, Nell watched Lord Collins and Lord Comran mount their

horses and set off down the road. Lord Collins looked back at her once and tipped his hat before departing, leaving Nell with Mary, who sighed in her lovestruck state.

“Oh, Nell, I never imagined that I would find such a man in all the world. Does he truly exist, or have I imagined all this?” Mary asked with a giggle.

“You have imagined nothing, Mary. It is true. That man clearly has fallen for you just as you have fallen for him. Before long, he is going to find a way to marry you, and you shall be the happiest woman in all of England,” Nell said, staring down the empty road.

“And you? Are you ever going to have this bliss? What is Lord Collins planning? And—what on earth?” Mary gasped, and her voice was raised as she took hold of Nell’s wrist and pulled it up to her eye-level.

“Lord Collins overheard us,” Nell said, answering the question that lingered in the air.

“He purchased this bracelet for you? *This*? Does he not know that you shall have to hide it? And how much do you think it cost him? I am stunned, Nell. I cannot believe that he bought you something so lovely,” Mary said, clearly astonished by the gesture.

“Indeed, it was a surprise. I am sure that Lord Comran is going to begin bringing you gifts soon enough. As for me, this is all I shall ever have of him,” Nell said.

“What do you mean? You should not be so dour,” Mary scolded.

“But it is the truth. He is a nobleman. I am a strange girl who lives in a cottage in the woods. I carve instruments, Mary. That is not the sort of activity known to the wife of an earl.

Besides, his father would never allow it, and my mother would be deeply hurt if anything were to happen between Lord Collins and myself. It would be foolish to expect anything different,” Nell said, rather practically.

But she didn’t want to be practical. She wanted to dream. She wanted to go back to that moment when Lord Collins very nearly kissed her, and she wanted to tell him that she would most certainly accept a single kiss from him. But it was too late for that. She would have to settle for this token if she could not have him with her.

Nell looked at the bracelet on her wrist. It truly was lovely. And although she would have to hide it away most of the time, she would never forget that this was a gift unlike any other. It was a gift from the man she loved

Chapter 23

Henry whistled happily as he entered the study. He sat at his desk and started looking over some papers, knowing he needed to update the financials with the partners in Hartville, Willowbrook, and Seventown. It was a full day's work, but Henry wasn't too concerned. He felt as if he would just float through the day without a care.

But before he could get too deep into it, he heard the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut, followed by angry footsteps headed his way.

Henry's father burst through the door of the study, and he looked at Henry with disdain.

"Father? What is it? What is the matter?" Henry asked.

"I could ask you the same, boy. What is the matter with you? What do you think you are doing? Have you gone mad?" his father asked in accusation.

"What are you talking about? What have I done that has so offended you?" Henry asked in surprise.

"That girl," his father spat. "I know that you have been out and about with the young woman. The one who is not noble. Who is she? The girl with the instruments? Is that the one you have spoken about?"

Henry was shocked that he had been caught. After all this time and with all the effort he had put into avoiding discovery, his father had finally learned the truth, and now there was no chance for Henry to hide it any longer.

“Father—”

“You dare to call me father? As though you have listened and respected me? I cannot believe that you have allowed yourself into this position, that you have put our family in this jeopardy! You are a disgrace, and I am appalled that you would have the gall to behave as though you are anything resembling a son of mine,” his father shouted.

It was a harsh blow to Henry, who had always tried to be obedient even when he disliked the decisions made by his father. But now, Henry saw the extent of his father’s anger and the fact that there was nothing to be done to stave it off. He was stuck in this world of forever being a disappointment.

“I never meant to offend you,” Henry said through clenched teeth. “I only wished to explain myself.”

“What can you possibly explain about this? You know what you have done, how it shames us. You must stop seeing her at once, or this will be the end of you. If you are not cautious, word is only going to spread, and everyone will know what you have done,” his father said.

“But I have done nothing. Nothing improper. Nothing shameful,” Henry insisted.

“You have done all those things just by being with her! You cannot go around with a woman who is not noble. The entire relation is

improper and will devastate our family if you are not careful. You must cease at once,” his father ordered.

Knowing there was only one thing he could say in his defence, Henry decided to push the business aspect of his relationship with Miss Hawkins. It was the only thing he could cling to in order to make his point.

“You misunderstand, Father. I want to speak with you about her instruments. Remember? I told you that they are remarkable. If we are unable to start selling them, I would like to invest my own money in her work and see to it that she finds success.

I think it is very important to allow her to show the people of England what she has made. They could revolutionize music in a whole new way,” Henry said, hoping that if he pushed enough, he could convince his father to give this more consideration.

But it was clear that his father was not fooled. In fact, he only appeared to be angrier. And by this point, Henry was tired of hiding his love for Miss Hawkins. He was tired of being a coward and trying to make things easier on himself.

“Do not lie to me, boy,” his father said in a threatening tone.

Henry sighed and felt the burden lift from his shoulders. The truth needed to come out for everyone’s sake.

“Very well. Then I admit it. I wanted to protect you as long as I could, but the truth of the matter is that I love her. I care nothing for society.

It means nothing to me at all, but she means everything. I love her, and I want to marry her. I know you disapprove, but I cannot stop myself from loving her,” Henry said.

His father seethed, narrowing his eyes at Henry and not bothering to hide his disdain. Henry understood there was nothing he could do, no way he could hide. His father’s anger was too powerful.

“You are a fool. You are a waste of a son, and I do not care for the nonsense you believe about yourself or this woman. You do not deserve to remain here in my home, and I do not wish to see you until you come to your senses,” his father said.

Henry stood in surprise, not wanting to accept what his father was saying. He could hardly believe that his father would be so angry that he would really send him away, that he would not even allow Henry to remain in the home.

“Did you not hear me? Leave!” his father shouted. “Get out of my home and do not return until you are ready to accept your responsibility! Get out! Get out!”

Henry stood, rushed from his desk and down the hall. He did not bother with getting anything from his room but ran out the door and to the stables. He ignored the groom as the man offered to help and, instead, Henry readied his horse on his own in a hurry before he mounted and took off at a gallop, eager to get away from his father.

Henry was furious, but he knew that his anger did not match his father’s. After all, his father was a bitter man because he did not believe in love. He believed only in wealth and power and the things that society offered him.

But Henry believed in so much more. He believed in the good things of the world and in those who truly mattered. He believed that Miss Hawkins deserved more than this, that she deserved to know how wonderful she was and how much he cared for her.

At that moment, Henry considered how much he wanted to go directly to see Miss Hawkins and tell her he loved her. He wanted to ask her to be his wife in that instant. But he knew that it would be a rash thing to do and would only get him into further trouble.

Instead, Henry made his way to see Daniel, hopeful that he would be able to stay with his friend for a while until he figured out what to do next. As he raced along the main road to the outskirts of London, Henry was desperate for help.

At last, he reached Daniel's estate and dismounted before running to the door. The maid let him inside and led him to the study, where Daniel was sitting with a book in hand.

"Henry? Come, sit down. What is the matter? You look upset," Daniel noted.

"It is my father. He knows about Miss Hawkins. Daniel, he is furious with me. He sent me away and told me I cannot return home until I let go of this nonsense. I do not know what to do. I think my only choice is to give up my inheritance, but I am not sure how I can survive and provide for Miss Hawkins if I do that," Henry said, letting it all out in a rush.

Daniel's eyes widened with surprise. He was clearly stunned by this news.

“What do you mean? Your father has sent you away? Would you no longer be allowed to work for him?” Daniel asked.

“Of course not. I am sure he would sever all ties to me, wanting nothing to do with the son who has shamed him,” Henry said.

“He cannot do such a thing, Henry. Surely. I am also an owner of the business. I shall simply tell him that I am unwilling to let you leave,” Daniel said.

“You own only a quarter, Daniel. As do I. He owns half. He is the one who decides,” Henry reminded him.

It was a painful truth, but his father would have his way, no matter what. Daniel was dependent upon his father for even the quarter of the business that he owned. It was a part of his inheritance. If his father denied him, there was nothing more Henry could do.

He was going to lose everything.

“Henry, you must think of something. You cannot simply lose what you have worked so hard to attain. I should hate to think of you without it. What are you going to do?” Daniel asked.

“Whatever I must,” Henry replied. “I cannot allow my father to come between me and Miss Hawkins. She means everything to me. And I know that you would not lose Mary simply because of the demands of another.”

“While that is true in theory, it has never been put to the test. And as you said, you want to provide for Miss Hawkins. How are you to do that if you have no work? How are you going to convince her mother to let her marry you if you are unable to provide?” Daniel challenged him.

Henry sighed, trying to think it through. He really did want to give Miss Hawkins a good life if they were going to be together. Anything less was not enough. But what would he do? Without the business, he had no other work, and he would have to find something in the midst of losing his reputation and all the ties to business he had through his father.

“Perhaps I could work with her to sell the instruments. We could start a new business,” he suggested, uncomfortable with the frailty of it.

“Henry, who are you going to sell them to? You will have lost all your ties to the wealthy, influential people who could assist you in that. And while I am sure that she could use a business mind such as yours, it would not be enough.

You need to consider what you will do now. Have you any other connections who might make an exception and hire you despite your father? Or will you get the sort of position that any man in England might have? Are you willing to work as they do, labouring over whatever must be done?”

Daniel had a way of presenting the options and giving Henry a chance to consider them properly. Although it was painful to acknowledge the risks of this quest, Henry was grateful that he had a friend who cared enough to be honest with him. He was glad that he could depend on Daniel to present him with the reality of his circumstances.

He needed to come up with a plan. If his father intended to abandon him without any favour, there was little that Henry could do other than hope that he would find another way of living his life and giving Miss Hawkins the life she deserved.

And if he could not, was he really worthy of her anyway? The last thing he wanted to do was push her onto a path of being stuck with him when she could have a much happier life without him.

For a woman like Miss Hawkins, Henry was eager to rescue her from her situation, not merely push her into a worse one.

What would he do if it turned out that he was every bit as bad for her as her own mother?

Chapter 24

By the time Henry and Daniel reached Mary's home, they were out of ideas. Henry had been racking his brain to try and come up with a way he could make enough money to support a family without his father's help.

But, as of yet, they had not come up with any decent ideas. Thus far, they were stuck with the truth that there was not much to be done for men like them if they lost a good position.

But when they saw Mary coming out of her home to greet them, Henry knew he had few options, and it was better to try and be hopeful than to give up altogether.

"Gentlemen, good morning! I expect you are here for us all to spend another day together?" Mary asked.

"Indeed, that is the hope we have," Daniel replied. "Have you any reason we are unable to spend time together?"

"None at all. I saw Eleanor's mother on her way to work this morning, actually, so I know she is in town. I think we will probably be just fine if we spend time together, and I believe that she will be very happy as usual.

But, Lord Collins, she did tell me once that you are often busy on Friday and cannot come to visit. Has something changed?" Mary asked.

Henry felt a pang of guilt and shame, wishing he had better news than his current situation. He was embarrassed by his predicament, knowing that it was a poor situation in which he found himself. After all, Miss Hawkins did not deserve a man who could not provide for her as it seemed he would soon be unable to do.

“Indeed, Mary. Something has changed. My father discovered my feelings for Miss Hawkins, and he has put me out of the house. I know that it may come as a shock to you and Miss Hawkins, but for my father, the idea of a man of my rank falling in love with a woman who is not noble, it is foolish,” he said.

“Goodness ...” Mary said, her eyes wide in surprise.

“Yes, I know. It is shameful,” he said, hanging his head.

“I am also shocked because I wish that Eleanor had heard you. You just confessed to being in love with her, and yet I have never heard you tell her as much,” Mary reminded him.

“And that was my grave mistake. But I assure you that I do. I will rectify the matter today. And once she knows that I love her, I am going to do all that is within my power to ensure that we can live together happily,” he said.

“You think that is a reasonable expectation? But what of the fact that your father is only one hurdle? Do you think you will be able to overcome the numerous other trials which stand against you? Is it a simple feat to push them all aside simply because you wish it? I would caution you to consider that her mother may not approve and that

even Nell may be nervous to move forward with what you are hoping for.

While I understand that she cares for you and would be happy to pursue the potential for a future, I also know that she does not know much about the world, and she would be remiss to simply move forward without taking time to think it through,” Mary said.

“You mean because she knows nothing but life in the cottage? I understand that. But I will do whatever must be done to give her confidence in my intentions and my love for her,” Henry said.

“And that sort of bold determination is precisely what will get you into trouble if you ask me. It is the very thing that will lead you to force her to make a very difficult decision. But I do hope that you choose the right thing, whatever it may be. And if you wish to marry Nell, I hope that you treat her as well as she deserves,” Mary said, a gentle warning in her voice.

“Of course,” he promised. “I will do whatever I must to provide for her and to give her a good life. I couldn’t bear the thought of her being unhappy or without anything.”

“I hope that you mean it. Because it is very likely that you shall soon be put to the test and if you are found to be false, I trust you understand that her consequences would be dire. And if the consequences are dire for her, I shall make certain they are worse for you,” Mary added with a frightening grin that assured Henry she meant every word she had spoken.

“Very well. Now that we have discussed the matter, shall we go and find Miss Hawkins? That way, Henry may speak with her directly on the matter,” Daniel suggested nervously.

“Indeed, that is a brilliant idea,” Mary replied stiffly.

Henry followed as the other two led the way, and they set out for Miss Hawkins’s home. Henry thought he would be nervous to tell her that he loved her, but instead, he found that he wanted nothing more than the chance to tell her everything that was in his heart. He hoped she would understand just how deep his love for her ran, how much he longed to be her husband.

He found himself dreaming of a future in which they had a small cabin of their own. They could make instruments together, and he would run the business. It would never make much money, but surely they could make it work, couldn’t they? There was every reason to believe they could succeed. He couldn’t bear to think they would fail.

But when he considered how the world truly worked, he knew that it was all nonsense, that he was a fool for believing they would ever have that. After all, why would anyone buy the instruments from them?

They would have no reason to trust that they were anything special. Even upon hearing them, no one wealthy enough would pay the money unless they thought the new music was considered fashionable and would give them better status in society.

And yet, Henry had faith.

They walked down the path together and were nearly at the final turn for Miss Hawkins’s home when they heard the sound of another voice.

“Eleanor! Come, I want to show you what Mr Whitby sent us. You are going to love it!”

Henry, Daniel, and Mary froze in place, with Mary gasping and then taking a step back and shaking her head.

“Hurry,” she said in a whisper, turning around.

Henry and Daniel were both confused, but Henry knew they should trust Mary. After all, if there was another woman at the house, it had to be Miss Hawkins’s mother.

“Is that her mother?” Henry asked.

“It is. And if she catches us, we are done for,” Mary said.

“But if I am going to pursue a future with Miss Hawkins, perhaps this is exactly what I ought to do. I should confront her mother, ask her permission to marry her daughter,” Henry said.

“No. If you do that now, you will never see her again. The best thing you can do is leave and come back when her mother is not at home. I do not know why she returned home today, but it is a good thing we were not there already,” Mary said.

“So how am I to convince her? Are you not the one who said I need to overcome these hurdles?” Henry argued as they walked. He was angry at himself for walking away just because Mary said to. He wanted to turn around and speak with Mrs. Hawkins at once.

“Not like this. You must speak with Nell first. Tell her you love her and want to marry her. Get her approval before you speak with her mother because, most likely, her mother is going to do everything she can to stop it from happening.

But if you just give Nell a chance to speak with her first, once Nell knows that you will do the right thing, that is when you will truly have a chance. Please, Lord Collins, I know that it is all very complicated and difficult to be patient, but you must do the right thing,” Mary urged.

Henry wanted to ignore her, but one look at Daniel told him that he had best listen. It was clear that Daniel agreed with Mary, that he thought Henry needed to take his time before rushing into this.

Henry sighed and charged forward, walking ahead of Mary and Daniel in his frustration. Just because he was doing what they said didn’t mean that he wanted to be. More than anything, he wanted to ignore them. But he obeyed, and in the process, he accepted that he needed to consider his options before diving in.

Rather than spending time with Daniel and Mary, Henry made his way to the inn. He figured that as long as he was in town, he would stay, hopeful that he could go to Miss Hawkins the next day.

He wanted to confront her mother at once, to tell her she was wrong for keeping Miss Hawkins hidden away like this. He wanted to tell her that he was taking her daughter to give her a life of joy and freedom.

But it was not necessarily possible, and he still didn’t know if he really could give Miss Hawkins that life after all. And until he knew what

the future held, there was no reason to make anyone believe that he knew what he was doing.

In truth, he was as lost as ever.

Mary had got under his skin. She was right about so many things, and he was ashamed of that. But when she challenged him, he was faced with the harsh reality. If he was going to show such bravado about his future with Miss Hawkins, when was he going to propose? When was he going to move forward?

These thoughts haunted him as he rested that evening, hopeful that the next day would carry more happiness than this. And if it did not, he would have nothing left to hope for.

Chapter 25

Nell was still fiddling with the tool that Mr Whitby had given her mother while her mother was selling her baked goods in town. Mr Whitby had apparently heard about Nell's affinity for carving and creating, and Nell was incredibly grateful for the gift that enabled her to make small holes in the wood without splintering it.

But she was shocked when she heard her mother returning home early for the evening. It was strange enough that her mother had come home in the afternoon, but this? It was most unusual, and Nell wondered what could be going on to send her mother back.

“Eleanor!”

This was not the excited call Nell had heard earlier from her mother. This time, something was wrong.

“Mother? What is it? What is the matter? Are you all right?” she asked, rushing out to see her mother.

“Eleanor, what have you done? What were you thinking? Have I taught you nothing? Did you believe this would not be discovered or that you would get away with it and I would never find out?”

Her mother's questions were hardened with hurt and betrayal. Nell knew without a doubt that Mother had found out about Lord Collins. It was clear in the look in her eyes that she knew Nell had disobeyed. But although it was time for everything to come to light, Nell was still frightened that her mother might end this once and for all.

“Mother, please, just listen to me. I know that you are upset. I know that you are hurt because I did not tell you about him, but I was trying to. I simply ... I did not know his intentions yet, and I wanted to be sure before I told you about it,” Nell began.

“But what is most important is that you know he is a good man. He is not like the men you have told me about, the nobles who are selfish and only care about getting what they want. I understand that you do not trust noblemen, but he truly is a good man.

He cares for me. He is ... patient, kind, and generous. You will see. I will introduce you to him, and you will know that I am right. He is good,” Nell insisted, repeating it again and again.

But her mother shook her head with a sad expression on her face.

“Nell, darling, this is going to be very difficult for you. I wish it did not have to be like this, but I have something you must see,” her mother said.

“What is it?”

Her mother ushered Nell into the small parlour, and Nell sat across from her mother, who pulled out a piece of paper.

“Tell me about this gentleman, Eleanor,” her mother said.

Nell bit her lip and smiled.

“He is ever so kind and dashinglly handsome. He has always been kind and proper with me, making me feel as if I am the only woman in all the world. He is constantly finding ways to show me that he cares for me, ensuring that I am well looked after and happy.

He praises my instruments, and he owns a business and wants to help me sell them to the people of London. And yes,” she continued, knowing that this part would be difficult for her mother to hear.

“Yes?”

“Yes, he is a nobleman. His father is an earl, but that hardly matters because he is a good man, Mother. And I truly believe that he cares for me. He has not told me that he loves me, but I do feel it when we are together. I know that he does. He does not have to say it when I know that it is true,” Nell said.

Her mother closed her eyes in dismay for a moment and took a deep breath before looking up at Nell once more.

“Nell, I am afraid you are wrong,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Nell asked, incredulous, nearly laughing at her mother’s denial of a man she didn’t even know.

“This is how I found out about him,” her mother said, handing Nell

the paper. "It is going to be difficult for you, but you must read it. I think it is important that you know the truth. I am sorry, darling. I never wanted you to go through this pain, but there it is. He has lied to you."

Nell took the paper, her heart quickening with fear. She didn't want to read anything that would ruin her belief about Lord Collins, but there was something that her mother held as evidence. And if it was true, if he had lied about something, Nell understood that it was better she learn the truth now before letting herself fall deeper in love with him.

Dear Mrs Hawkins,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing on a very important matter regarding your daughter.

As it happens, I am meant to be married very soon. My betrothed is the son of an earl, and he is a most intriguing gentleman. Unfortunately, the aspects that made me care for him are also rather appealing to other young women.

After being seen around Mariswood with a young woman, I confronted my betrothed. He informed me that he was seeing your daughter, that he was trying to help her with her music, but that she seemed to have stronger feelings for him than that. I pushed for the truth, thinking that he must be hiding something from me.

At last, he confessed that he was coming to have feelings for her as well.

Mrs Hawkins, this is very painful for me to write. He has told me that he still intends to marry me, that he has no intention of

pursuing a relationship with your daughter. But I knew that I must handle the situation because I cannot bear to lose him.

He is a kind man who makes anyone feel important, but he would never be allowed to marry a young lady who is not of noble birth. And when I asked him if he would prefer it, he assured me that while he had begun to care for her, he loves me and still wishes to marry me, even if he did have another choice.

Because of this, I humbly ask that you keep your daughter away from him. Please tell her that she cannot steal him away from me. He would lose everything and be abandoned by his family if she continued trying to attract him. And I would lose the love of my life.

I know that I could appeal to your daughter, but she may be less inclined to listen. You, however, I hope to be wise enough to understand the consequences. Your daughter's reputation could be at stake, and no one would ever be willing to marry her if they found that she had tried to seduce an earl away from his intended.

Thus, I hope that you will listen and do the right thing, aiding me in pursuing my own happiness with the man I love—a man who loves me as well and fully intends to marry me despite the quiet care that he holds for your daughter.

Thank you, and I do wish you all the best in finding a husband for your daughter.

Regards,

Nell let the letter fall to her lap, her heart aching with a pain she had never imagined in all her life. Was this possible? Had Lord Collins really lied to her, and was he already betrothed to another woman without telling her?

All this time, he had let Nell think that he cared for her, that he wanted to be with her. But if he was intended to marry this Lady Dormer, it was certainly possible that he had simply been enjoying a bit of fun with Nell before settling down to the life that he was supposed to have for the rest of his days. Perhaps he had been using Nell all along. Maybe he had simply been trying to have a little bit of fun.

“I am terribly sorry, Eleanor. I know how much pain you must be in. This is why I always wanted you to stay away from men like that. I did not want you to have the suffering I experienced when I fell in love with a nobleman,” her mother said.

“But it cannot be true,” Nell insisted.

“I fear that it is, my dear. This man is every bit as much a liar as the others like him. I know you do not wish to acknowledge it, but it is the truth, and you have the evidence here on paper. I know you care for him, but do not put yourself through this, Eleanor. Just let him go,” her mother urged.

“But how?” Nell asked, tears welling up in her eyes. She still wanted to deny it. She couldn’t believe he would ever do this to her, and it was easier to reject the possibility than to think that Lord Collins had

been hiding this from her.

She really had believed that he was falling in love with her just as she had fallen in love with him. He had given her so many signs of his affection. Even the bracelet! Why would he have spent so much money just to use her for his own amusement? Would he not have been wiser to save that money? Had Nell not already shown that she cared for him? Why did he need to get her a gift to secure her interest?

She felt like such a fool. If this was true—and there was no reason to believe it wasn't—she had fallen into the same trap that her mother had fought so hard to protect her from. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. It was all just a farce, and she was terribly ignorant for ever thinking that a nobleman like him really could care for her.

“Come here, Eleanor,” her mother said, drawing her close.

Nell knew that her mother was angry at her for hiding this but was grateful that she could at least still care and show her some affection to prove that it was all just a matter of protecting Nell. She was glad that her mother loved her enough not to let her anger overwhelm the moment.

“Darling, I never want to see you go through this pain again. We must do whatever we can to ensure that you are safe, that you do not have to suffer like this,” her mother said.

“But this has to be a lie, Mother,” Nell insisted as the tears flowed down her cheeks. She tried to hold the emotion back, but it was only a moment before she fell into deep sobs of pain. She couldn't believe that it had come to this, that she had to experience such misery when Lord Collins had seemed to be such a wonderful man.

How could it be that he would put her through this? How could the same man who had given her so much joy now be responsible for all her pain?

“I know that you want to believe it is a lie, darling, but you must accept the truth. Men like him? They want to use women like us for their own fancy. They enjoy the opportunity to do something rebellious before they are committed to their position and being nobles.

I was treated the same, remember? I thought he loved me. He gave me every reason to believe that he did. He bought me gifts, he kissed me twice, and he promised me that he cared and that we would be together,” her mother said.

Nell took in a ragged breath, not wanting to hear any more of it.

“I do not know what promises this man made to you or all he did to convince you of his love, but I want you to know that he will not get away with it any longer. I want to trust you to do the right thing and stand up for yourself, but I need you to promise me that you will not allow him to use you,” her mother said.

Nell finally managed to steady herself, and she nodded slowly to her mother.

“If this is true, I wish to find out for myself. I am not sure how I will do it, but I promise you that I will not let him hurt me any more than this,” Nell said, determined to be strong.

In truth, she had no idea how to confront him about this, but she wanted to see Lord Collins again and have the opportunity to look him in the eye before she sent him away. She wanted to decide in her own right and know whether it was the right thing to be rid of him. She couldn't believe all this. It was so contrary to the man she had thought he was, but the truth was before her eyes. A letter from his betrothed. How could she argue with that? And why had she allowed herself to go against everything her mother had been telling her for years?

After all, Nell should have known the truth by now.
A nobleman is a bad man.

Chapter 26

Henry was eager to see Miss Hawkins at last and tell her how he felt about her. When he arrived at her home the next day, having told Daniel he wished to go alone, he was happy to find that her mother was not there and Miss Hawkins was sitting out front as usual, working away at her instruments.

“Miss Hawkins,” he said, walking towards her with excitement. He was going to tell her everything in his heart. He only needed to take a deep breath and proceed.

“Lord Collins,” she replied in a rather unfriendly tone.

Henry’s brows drew together. She did not even look up at him. It was strange. She was not acting like her usual self. Instead of the sweet woman he had come to know and love, she was distant and clearly more interested in the work before her than she was in his presence.

“Is this poor timing?” he asked.

“Not at all,” she replied, casually. At last, she looked up at him, but there was a strange coldness in her eyes. Something was very wrong.

Henry sat beside her and tried to make a quick decision. He needed to be wise about what he would say next, but all he really wanted to do was jump into telling her how much he loved her. Was that the right thing? Somehow he now felt it was not.

“Miss Hawkins, I wanted to speak with you about something very serious,” he began.

She waited, somewhat impatiently as far as he could tell, for him to speak.

“Is that all right with you?” he asked, hesitant to continue until he knew what was on her mind.

“Certainly, Lord Collins. You may say whatever is on your mind,” she replied. Henry could see it now. There was a little trace of hope in her eyes. She wanted to hear what he was going to say. She wanted to know. That had to be a good sign.

Whatever was different about her, he knew he could wipe away any of her concerns by simply telling her how he felt.

“Much has happened these last few days. I do not wish to bore you with all the details of it, but it is important that you know that it has pushed me into a position in which I must make a firm decision about some things,” he said.

“And what sort of decision is that?” she asked.

“I wanted to tell you that I am here because I care for you, Miss Hawkins. Not just in terms of friendship as I thought you might feel for me. But I care for you beyond that. I care for you in the way that any man might care for a woman and wish to make something more of their life together. I want you to know that I ... I ...”

He only had to get the words out. To tell her that he loved her. That was the most important thing. But he had never said those words to anyone before, and with the way she was acting now, Henry found himself nervous.

What if she did not feel the same, after all? What if she was only going to laugh in his face or think he was a fool? He had not been worried before, but he now realised that something was definitely wrong and, whatever it was, he was afraid of making it worse.

“Lord Collins, do you have any specific intentions for me?” she asked, giving him a chance to come out with it more easily.

Henry smiled, grateful that she was pushing him forward gently. It gave him a chance to reframe what he wanted to say.

“Yes, I do,” he replied. “I wanted to tell you that I wish to court you. Formally. I want to address the matter with your mother and tell her about my feelings towards you. I want her to know about my visits and see if we can come to an understanding about the future.”

“The future?” she asked, a hint of a challenge in her voice.

“Yes, the future,” he replied. “I want your mother to know that I intend to marry you. I want to be your husband and you to be my wife.”

Miss Hawkins’s eyes softened, and her lips parted as though to ask him a question. But she thought better of it, clutching something in her pocket. It sounded like paper, but he couldn’t be sure.

“You wish me to be your wife?” she asked, the hardness returning.

“Yes, I do,” he insisted, sensing that she didn’t believe him.

“Lord Collins, if I may be so bold, what would you possibly get out of such a marriage?” she asked.

Henry was taken aback. He would never have imagined that question. How could she even ask it? He loved her. Was that not enough?

“I am afraid I do not understand your meaning,” he said.

“I mean that you are going to be an earl, and you have a great number of opportunities for your life. Why would you waste your time with a woman such as I? I know very little of the world.

I am simply a strange girl who lives in a cottage in the woods, and I could never bring you anything but naivety and difficulty. You would never impress your friends or family with me. When I think about it logically, I cannot possibly be so foolish as to think you would be happy with a woman like myself,” she said.

“B-but that is not true. I do care for you. I lo—”

“Please, do not make this more difficult than it already is, Lord Collins. Whatever you think you want from me, I will not be fooled by

it, and it is best if you no longer allow yourself to linger in the nonsense. You ought to leave,” she said matter-of-factly.

Henry sat there, stunned by this strange turn of events. He couldn't believe what she was saying. What had happened to make her change so completely? Who was this woman sitting before him, and where had the sweet, kind Miss Hawkins gone to? What made her so harsh, and why did she think him insincere?

“Miss Hawkins, has something happened that I should know about? Have I offended you in some way?” he asked.

“Lord Collins, I only wish that you would be completely honest with me about everything. I wish that I had known the full truth of who you are. And I find it very difficult to believe that you would want to marry me when there are so many women out there of your own station. Women who could make you happy. Women who would be accepted as your wife,” she said, a salty tone carrying her words.

“I ... I am at a loss for words, Miss Hawkins. What have I done to offend you?” he asked.

“You have allowed me to think that I am the one with whom you wish to spend your life, and you carry this charade on even now as you say you want to court me,” she said.

“It is no charade,” he insisted.

“Am I to believe you? Am I really to think that you do not have—”

She cut herself off before finishing the sentence. It seemed to Henry that he was supposed to know what she was talking about, but he had no idea. Whatever was bothering her, he couldn't imagine what it might be.

"Please, Miss Hawkins, will you just tell me what has taken place to cause you to question my affection for you? Why do you doubt me?" he asked with caution.

"A letter, Lord Collins," she said.

"A letter? What sort of letter?"

"A letter that assures me I am nothing more than a pawn in your game, just as my mother warned me I would be with any man like you," Miss Hawkins said.

"I know not what game that is," he said, still utterly bewildered by what was going on. "Who is the letter from? Why has it caused you to doubt me? I do not understand, Miss Hawkins. I cannot possibly explain what you are upset about unless you tell me and give me the chance to make it right."

"You cannot make it right," she said.

"I will do whatever I must to make it right. I want to be your husband. And if you do not wish to be my wife, that is up to you, but at least tell me why," he pleaded.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have chosen me above all other women?" she asked.

“Of course I have,” he replied.

“And why?”

He eyed her for a moment, realising that she would not be content until he answered the question. But how could he? What sort of question was it? There was no reason other than the fact that he loved her. She was the only woman in the world to him. How could he not place her above all others?

As Henry stuttered for an answer, Miss Hawkins shook her head and scoffed as she stood.

“Indeed. That is what I thought. You have nothing to say. Goodbye to you, Lord Collins. Do not come back here again. I do not want to see you,” she said.

“Miss Hawkins, I do not understand what has happened,” he said, standing and coming behind her as she slipped inside. “Will you not answer—”

With that, the cottage door slammed in his face.

Henry stood out there in shock. He could not understand her sudden vehemence. What had he done wrong? Why was she so angry with him? Was there something he didn’t know about? Had he said the wrong thing? Done the wrong thing? Had he offended her, or had someone else urged her to push him away?

He wondered if her mother had said something. But that could not be it. Her mother had been urging her to stay away from men like him for such a long time. There was no reason for Miss Hawkins to now, suddenly push him away. She would have obeyed her mother long before now if that were her intention.

He simply couldn't understand. It made no sense that she would be so angry.

"Miss Hawkins!" Henry shouted, standing out there with desperation in his heart.

But he was met only with silence.

"Miss Hawkins, I love you! I love you, and I want to marry you. You must listen! You must give me a chance!" he shouted, banging on the door.

Still, she did not come.

She had told him to leave and never come back. Had she meant it? But why?

Henry knew there was nothing to be done. He could stand out there as long as he wanted, but Miss Hawkins would not come. He was better off giving her a bit of peace for the rest of the day. He could come back the following day and see if she had cooled down at all.

If he were lucky, she would be willing to speak with him about

whatever had caused her so much anger. And once he knew what was really going on in her heart, he would know how to proceed and how he could best handle this strange turn of events.

As Henry slowly made his way back to town, his heart was heavy, and he was full of uncertainty. It was painful to be sent away like that, but he imagined that something must have happened. Something she would explain to him when he returned the next day. And when he was back to see her again, he would wait patiently for an answer, and only then would he be at peace.

Chapter 27

Nell sat in her room, playing a mournful song that conveyed the sadness of her broken heart. She didn't know what else to do, and this was the only thing that would give her any peace amid the pain she was feeling. Although she understood that the world had a way of crashing down around her, she had been foolish enough to hope that everything would work out, that she would find a way to be happy.

But it did not seem possible any longer. Now that she had lost the man she cared for, now that she had pushed him away and insisted he never speak to her again, Nell was sure she could never experience the sort of joy she had so recently thought attainable.

She would never have the opportunity to get out of her cage, away from her sorrow, or understand the goodness she had always believed must exist somewhere in the world.

The sad song was not enough to cure her of her pain, but it was a way she could express it without spending all her time weeping into her pillow. At least this gave her a chance to channel her sadness into music, and that was always what she tried to do, even when not always successful at it.

She heard a sound from down the hall and knew that her mother must be home after finishing her work. But Nell ignored it. She focused on the sounds coming from the Belute and tried to lose herself in the music.

After a few minutes, however, she heard the knock at her door, and her mother entered without waiting for Nell to let her in.

“Eleanor, may I sit with you for a moment?” her mother asked, coming to the bed where she sat beside Nell.

“Yes, Mother. What is it?” Nell asked, her tone flat and unfeeling.

“I know that you are upset, and I cannot condemn you for that, but I wanted to speak with you about everything and see if you are all right, my dear,” her mother said.

“No, Mother,” she replied with a shrug. “I am not all right. But since I cannot change my circumstances, I shall simply try to do whatever I can to push through the pain.”

Her mother sighed, and her shoulders sagged. Nell understood that she didn’t want this pain for her but didn’t seem to know how to make it any better.

“I know you are mad at me for not telling you about him. You tried so hard to protect me against men like him, and I disobeyed you. I am sorry, Mother. I know that I upset you, and I should have listened,” Nell said.

“Darling, I would never be angry with you about it. I was only worried. Yes, I wish you had told me, but that is for your own protection. You may think that it was all about trying to keep you away from men, but it was actually about keeping you safe from the pain that men cause. You do not deserve this, and I never wanted you to have to live through this sadness,” her mother said.

“Thank you, Mother, but there is nothing now to be done about it.

This is the life that I now have, and I will get by,” Nell said.

“I do not want you to simply get by. I want you to thrive and be happy. There are good men in the world, Nell. There are those who will make you happy, who will grant you all the good things you thought you might find with this man.

I know that you are hurting, but you need not hurt forever. There will be a day when you have all the love in the world,” her mother said.

“It is not possible, Mother. You were right to keep me from people. I should never have doubted you,” Nell said.

“No, darling. On the contrary, I think keeping you away from people was my grave error in all this. If I had given you more freedom, you never would have been drawn to this man.

He would not have been able to give you the promise of care and affection that ultimately led to your pain. It was my mistake for thinking that you needed me to protect you when you could have had the security of so many others around you,” her mother said.

“It is too late now, Mother. I have Mary, and I have Daisy outside. I need no one else,” Nell said.

“What of the other bird? The one you just rescued last week?” her mother asked.

Nell chewed the inside of her cheek, not wanting to acknowledge the truth of it.

“She left and did not come back. Because that is what happens, Mother. When we cage things, as I caged her to give her time to heal, we risk that they might never return to us once they are free. I let her go to see if she was recovered, and she never returned,” Nell said.

Her mother’s eyes filled with tears, and Nell understood that her mother was no longer thinking of the bird.

“Is that what I have risked? I have caged you for so long, Eleanor. Are you going to leave and never come back? Have I suffocated you?” she asked.

Nell sighed and shook her head.

“No, Mother. On the contrary, I think I shall be like Daisy. I shall never, never leave here. Now that I know how dangerous the world is, how dependent I am upon someone else to keep me safe, I can do nothing but stay here forever, hoping that it means I will be all right, that I will stay away from danger,” Nell replied.

Her mother hung her head, and Nell had little more to say. She couldn’t believe how this had all fallen apart. She didn’t know what to do.

“Did he come today?” her mother finally asked.

“He came,” Nell replied.

“Did he confess?”

“No, Mother. I could not even bring myself to mention Lady Dormer, but I gave him the chance to tell me about her. And when I asked him if he really loved me above all others and why, he could not give me an answer of any kind. So I sent him away,” Nell told her.

“I am sure that he loved you in some way. It is just that men love differently than us, and their love is so often temporary. But you did the right thing, Eleanor. You were strong enough not to let him talk you into anything you did not want. I am proud of you,” her mother said.

“It was not easy, but I cannot allow him to use me like that any longer. I am finished with this, Mother. I am going to find my happiness no matter what, and I do not need him to use me as you warned,” she said.

They were quiet for a moment before Nell spoke up again. She really did feel caged, and she didn’t want to be here any longer.

“Mother, I fear that he is going to come back and try to see me again. Moreover, I am heartbroken here, and I desperately want to escape for a while. Is there anywhere we might go? Just to get away for a time?” she asked.

Her mother seemed to ponder the question for a moment before giving a single nod.

“I suppose if you wish. I think it may be a good idea,” her mother said.

“I cannot abide all the memories I have of him here right now. It is too painful. And if you are right, if there are other good men out there, perhaps I might have the chance to find one. If we are away from Hartville for a time, and if you want me to go out and meet others, I shall.

But if you want me to be a caged bird, I promise always to come back,” she said, no longer having the willpower to decide for herself.

Nell was strong, and she was proud of that strength, but she was also tired. She was too tired to maintain her determination at that moment. It was easier to rely on her mother to make the decisions and tell her what to do. She had already proven Nell wrong, so clearly she had better answers, did she not?

Nell wanted to lean into them for a time, hopeful that she might glean some wisdom from her mother and she could let go of the pain of trying to do it all on her own.

Deciding to listen to her mother and pursue the opportunity to get away for a while, Nell thought this would be the chance she needed to gain a new perspective and leave behind the pain she had been through.

“Eleanor, I do not want you always to have to come back, but there will always be a place for you if you wish. For now, I think you are right. We should get away for a while, and I know just the place,” her mother said.

“Oh? Where to?” Nell asked eagerly, excited for the chance to see somewhere new.

“We will go and stay with your grandmother for a little while. She will be delighted to see you again as she has not come to visit since her health difficulties. But having not seen you in nearly three years, she will be so happy, darling. We must go to her,” Nell’s mother insisted.

“Really? And you think it will be all right? You do not mind that you will be unable to work for our time away?” Nell asked, knowing that her mother did not have very much money, and it was difficult to skip her work.

“Yes, my dear. I have a little saved, and your grandmother will have enough while we are there. I think it is the best thing for us to do. She will be happy, and you will have the opportunity to get away from here for a little while. It is a perfect plan,” her mother said.

Nell was delighted by the idea. She had not known her grandmother well throughout her life since they lived hours apart, but any chance she did see her grandmother was a good one.

This opportunity to get away for a bit was delightful, and Nell was thrilled that she could also go north a little way and see the world up there that her grandmother had spoken of. She always told of how lush and green it was.

Nell considered it rather lush and green where they lived, but her grandmother had only scoffed and said it hardly compared.

At once, Nell stood from the bed and started packing a few of her instruments into a carpetbag.

“You wish to leave right away?” her mother asked with a laugh.

“As soon as we are able,” Nell replied eagerly.

“Very well. Tomorrow morning, my dear. I promise you we will go first thing. You get your things packed and then get some rest. It will be a long journey, and we want to be in good shape when we arrive to see your grandmother. I would hate her to think I am not taking good care of you,” her mother teased.

“Yes, Mother. I shall get some rest. But thank you for this. Thank you,” Nell said.

She really was relieved to think she was getting a fresh start, even if she was only going to come back. This time away would help her escape the pain, she hoped.

And if she did not escape it, if it only returned to her once more, Nell was sure that she would never be happy again.

Chapter 28

Henry was up early in the morning and had a quick breakfast at the inn before he figured Miss Hawkins's mother would have left the house. He quickly departed the inn and made straight for the home in an effort to speak with her right away.

He needed to find out why she had been so cold the previous day. It was utterly unlike anything he had seen from her character thus far. She was never so harsh. It was simply not in her nature.

Whatever this letter was that she had mentioned, he needed to know what it said and why it would ruin their chances of being happy together. There had to be something more going on, and he was desperate to know what it was.

Henry had struggled to sleep the night before, so upset he was. He hadn't known what to do or say, but he had tried to think through every word that had come from her lips and see if he might be able to find answers in the midst of it all. Unfortunately, all he had managed to find was more questions.

If he was going to learn whatever had happened to change her like this, he needed to do it quickly and to fight as hard as he needed to discover the truth. And if he had a chance to correct any false impressions, that was his primary goal. He would do whatever he must to ensure that Miss Hawkins knew he loved her.

He would not allow her to cut him off this time. He would get the words out. He would insist that she listen and allow him to explain himself if he needed to explain anything at all.

At last, he reached the home, and Henry was surprised that Miss Hawkins was not sitting outside as she normally did. He looked around for Daisy, but he did not see the bird either, which was also strange. The little sparrow was always around, chirping and enjoying the music. For a day like this, when the weather was beautiful and the air fresh, it made no sense for them both to be gone.

Henry knocked on the door, knowing it would give her a chance to hide if she wished, but he was not going to give up. He needed to speak with her, no matter what.

At last, after knocking for the third time, he opened the door and took a cautious step inside.

“Miss Hawkins? I know you do not wish to speak with me, but we must talk. I need to know what happened. Please, allow me to explain myself,” he said into the silence.

There was no reply, and the house had an eerie quiet that he disliked.

“Miss Hawkins? Please. Please, come speak with me,” he said, taking a step forward. “I love you, and I want to marry you. I want to do the right thing by speaking with your mother about it, but I would propose to you today if I could.

Please, come speak with me. I want to make you my wife, and it is agony waiting a moment longer. Please, whatever I must do, I will do it,” he called out.

But Miss Hawkins did not appear to be home. He screwed his courage to walk further into the house and glanced into the rooms that were

open and peered into the ones that had doors. When he came upon a room full of instruments surrounding a bed, he figured he had discovered her own room.

Although he was tempted to search through it, Henry knew that was unwise. Instead, he finished looking into each room before he accepted that she was simply not there.

Distraught by her absence, Henry had to find clues as to her whereabouts. She had probably simply gone into town with Mary, but something about that did not sit right with him either. Daniel was in town to see Mary, and if Daniel and Mary were together, Daniel would come and find Henry to tell him where Miss Hawkins was.

Of course, Daniel did not know everything that had happened, but surely he would insist to her that she had not understood Henry properly and that whatever had happened to cause her doubt, it was wrong.

But there had to be something. Something that would give him an idea as to where she was and what had happened.

When Henry made his way back towards the parlour, he stepped inside and looked at two of the instruments there that he had not seen before. But then he saw a crumpled paper on the mantelpiece that caught his eye. It was out of place in the otherwise tidy home. And he recalled the letter she had spoken of and the sound of paper in her hand.

Henry rushed to the mantle and took the paper, straightening it properly and reading it in a hurry.

It didn't make sense. Who was Lady Rosalee Dormer? And why was she claiming to be the intended of the future earl who was spending time with Miss Hawkins?

After a moment of confusion, Henry was starting to understand. This was the thing she had read which made her believe that he was interested in another woman. That was why she kept challenging him about whether he really cared for her above all other women. She thought he was engaged to be married to another!

But what had happened? Who was this woman? Why would she send this letter? Did her intended simply look like Henry, and she had mistaken him?

No, that did not make sense. She claimed in the letter that her betrothed had confessed to this.

And that was when the sinister reality hit Henry at last.

This was not written by some young woman engaged to be married. This was written by someone who was trying to stop Henry and Miss Hawkins from being together. He could only imagine that it had been written by either his father or her mother. They must have both known by now, and it could have been either of them who had done this to try and tear Henry and Miss Hawkins apart from one another.

Henry thought he was going to be sick. Someone had done this to her? Someone had made her believe that he was lying about his feelings and that he had another woman waiting for him? It was sick. It was dreadful. And now, he had to find a way to make her realise that it was all a lie.

He was hurt that she had believed it, but Henry tried to push that aside. There was no reason for her to think it was a lie. After all, this was the very reputation she had always heard about men like him, that they used young ladies such as her. Why would she not trust the letter? It was the evidence she had to work with.

Knowing that he could do nothing more about it until he found her, Henry set to his search.

He made his way into town, where he found Mary on her own. She claimed that Daniel had only come to say a quick goodbye before heading back into London for some important meeting. At that moment, Henry realised he had forgotten all about the meeting Daniel had mentioned, and he felt like a fool for not knowing Daniel would be gone.

“And Miss Hawkins? Where is she? I need to explain to her,” he insisted.

“Explain what? I have not seen her in days. I will probably go by to visit her tomorrow,” she said.

“She is not there,” Henry told her.

“What? What do you mean?”

Henry explained the entire situation, and Mary gasped, surprised that anyone was trying to come between them and shocked that Miss

Hawkins and her mother were not in town.

Mary promised to tell Miss Hawkins the truth if she saw her, and Henry knew that he should get back to London to find Daniel and talk to him once his meeting was over. He didn't want to be alone in town, but he wanted to think of a strategy for finding Miss Hawkins, and Daniel was the best man for the job.

But when Henry arrived at Daniel's estate, he was shocked by the presence of someone else entirely.

"Sit down," his father ordered when Henry entered the study.

"Father? What are you doing here?" Henry asked in surprise, not wanting to deal with this. His father was the last person he wished to see.

"I am here to discuss your foolishness. Now, sit down," his father demanded again.

Henry sighed and sat next to his father, who already had a brandy in hand. It seemed that he had come, and the maids were assisting him as if he were some invited guest.

"Father, I do not have the energy for another argument with you," he said, determined to find out if his father had anything to do with the letters.

“Then do not argue. I am here only to find out if you are ready to give up in your quest for this woman who is going to ruin you and all our family,” his father said.

Henry clenched his jaw, irritated that his father had put it so brazenly.

“I will not give up on her. I care not for what happens to me. I want to marry her. If you deny me, so be it. I am going to find a way,” he insisted.

A low growl rumbled in his father’s throat, and Henry knew that he was far from finding approval. But he didn’t care. He had made up his mind.

“I would have thought you would be ready to come home by now, but it seems that you are addicted to folly. Such a shame,” his father said.

“And I know that you care nothing for this woman, but I need to know the truth. Did you send her that letter? Are you the one who pretended I am betrothed?” Henry asked.

His father winced with a look of pride and confusion.

“Letter? Betrothed? Whatever do you mean?” he asked.

Henry studied his father for a moment, unsure if he was being honest or simply a good enough actor to deny the letter. Henry wasn’t entirely convinced. He imagined that his father would be good at

hiding this, and now, he saw that it was likely true.
“It was you, was it not?” he prodded.

“What was me? I did nothing, Henry. You are the one who has made the errors in all this. Now, I ask you once more, are you ready to come home?” his father asked, shifting the question back.

“I will not give up on her,” Henry said firmly. “I will never give up on her.”

With that, his father raged, letting out another growl as he stood and stormed out of the room, clearly angered beyond measure and unable to contain himself.

Henry watched him go, feeling as if he had made no progress. It was infuriating to wonder what had happened and not get any answers. He hoped that Miss Hawkins was safe and that he would find her soon, but more than ever, Henry was uncertain about everything going on in his life and what it meant for him and others.

He wanted to have the peace of knowing she was well, but for the moment, he was only more confused than ever. What if he never saw her again? What if he never had the chance to explain the truth to her?

And what if he was wrong and someone else was behind the letter? Worst of all, what if he spent the rest of his life knowing that he was hated by the only woman he had ever loved?

Chapter 29

Nell curled up on the lounge beside her grandmother, enjoying all the stories her grandmother told.

“Your mother was such a lovely young girl. She looked very much like you, you know. And your father? He was a good man. I was delighted when they found one another,” her grandmother said.

Nell smiled, but she had other questions as well. She wanted to know about the earl that her mother had loved. Did her grandmother know all about him? What else had happened?

“Grandmama, do you know why Mother hated nobles so badly?” she asked, frankly.

Her grandmother showed a pained smile and nodded.

“Yes, my dear. I am afraid I do.”

“Has she told you?”

“Part of it. I know that a nobleman tried to court her, and then he was awful, and he broke her heart.”

“But not all noblemen would do that, would they?” Nell asked, beginning to second guess the fact that she had not given Lord Collins the chance to explain himself.

What if there was more going on than just what his betrothed had shared? What if they were not in love, and he was being forced into the marriage or trying to get out of it? What if he really did care for Nell?

She was still angry that he hadn't told her about the woman, but Nell wished she had listened. He may have had a reason for not telling her, and she ought to have given him the chance to tell her the full truth.

"No, my dear. Not all noblemen are as bad as your mother believes, but that does not mean they are all good either. She told me that the son of an earl had shown an interest in you and that he broke your heart when you received a letter from his betrothed.

I think that is all you need to know, Nelly," her grandmother said, using one of the other affectionate nicknames Nell had.

"But I did not even allow him to tell me everything. I should have given him the chance," Nell said.

"On the contrary, he should have told you long ago. You did not need to beg him. He ought to have been open with you about it. If he was not, you know that he was hiding it, and that is wrong, my dear. You have nothing to apologise for," her grandmother said.

Nell knew she was right, but it was still difficult to accept. If she could go back and do it all over again, she would have.

"Now, my dear, listen to me. You have a good chance to move forward in your life without this man, and you must take it. There are others out there who will make you happy," her grandmother said.

But Nell began to cry, unable to stop herself. She leaned into her grandmother's arms and allowed herself to cry.

"I know, Nelly. I know it is hard. I know that love can be cruel sometimes. But you must remember that there are good days ahead. Whatever has happened in the past, it does not mean your future must be lost as well. Just have hope because a time will come when you fall in love with a man who is deserving of you," she said.

"But I still love him. I know that I should not. I know that he has an intended, but I cannot help myself. He is everything I ever could have hoped for. He is so kind and generous.

He came to ask me if he could speak with Mother so we could court, and then he wanted to marry me. He told me, Grandmama," Nell said, choking up with the words and knowing that she had either been very foolish or she was wrong for ever having trusted him.

"Perhaps he realised that he wanted to be with you, but it would not change his circumstances. It would be a scandal if he left his betrothed for you, and men like that must avoid scandals at all costs, Nelly. You were right to leave him and come here to get away for a while.

I hope that he thinks about what he did and comes and apologises to you. But for now? It is best that you have time to rest and be away from whatever he wants. You deserve a husband who will love you completely," her grandmother insisted.

But Nell didn't know if such a man could ever exist. She didn't think

there would be anyone she could love half so much as Lord Collins. And although she wanted to believe that he had good intentions for her, she had to accept that his love for her must have been false from the beginning.

“Come, my dear. Look at me. You know what happened to your mother, how that man used her and then left her heartbroken. But you also know what happened next,” her grandmother said.

“What do you mean?” Nell asked.

“Within six months, she met another man. Samuel Hawkins. He did not have a grand title. He did not have much money, but he did have a good heart and a will to provide for his family. And that man did all that he could for your mother. He loved her immensely, and he loved you as well, even when you were still in her womb,” her grandmother said.

Nell smiled, wishing she'd been able to meet her father. She thought about him often, about how nice it would have been to have a father while growing up, someone to look after her and make the decisions that her mother struggled with. She wished she had a father to guide her now and tell her what to do.

“It was very difficult for your mother when he passed away, but I know he would have given anything to have seen you grown up. I know you must be sad that you never had the chance to know him or be raised by him, but I want you to know that, even when men like this gentleman let you down, you had a man in your life who loved you more than words can describe.

He wanted everything to be the best for you, and he gave his life to

make it happen,” her grandmother reminded her.

It was significant to remember, and Nell vowed to herself that she would not forget it. Her father really did love her more than anything. She didn't know him or know much about him aside from what her mother had told her, but she did know that he was a good man and that was important to remember.

“Now, I would like it very much if you would play me some music,” her grandmother said.

Nell nodded, grateful for the chance to spend this time with her grandmother. While her mother was in town, picking up a few things for her grandmother, Nell gathered the instruments she had brought and sat with her grandmother in the parlour for a while, playing songs that had at least a little bit of mirth to them, as compared with her usual tunes of late.

But before long, Nell looked up and saw that her grandmother had fallen asleep. Rather than playing and making noise, Nell took the instruments outside and sat in a rocking chair her grandmother had out there.

Nell breathed in the air and looked around the small home. Her grandmother had been correct. It was far more beautiful here than it was back home. Shockingly, this was the most beautiful place Nell had ever seen.

She wanted to believe that all this beauty could bring her happiness and make everything that much better. Although she knew that nothing would utterly cure her sorrow, she trusted that by putting everything she could into the hope of a better future, she could

overcome her pain.

Of course, she didn't know that she could ever love again, but she bore in mind her mother's story and hoped it would be similar to her own in that she would find someone who made her love for Lord Collins to seem like a paltry infatuation rather than a lifelong love.

But Nell hoped she would not lose the man she would one day fall in love with as her mother had so painfully lost her father. Nell hoped she would fare better than that and that she could have the happiness she so desperately craved, even when it seemed impossible to attain.

She held the Bower in her left hand, balancing it on her thigh so she could position her fingers properly on the strings. With her right hand, she held the bow steady, and Nell closed her eyes as she began to play a song so softly.

If she had been home, she would have expected Daisy to come to her, but Daisy was not here. When they left home, she had tried to draw Daisy in by playing a song that morning. But she had not come, and Nell had been forced to leave without her.

She grieved now, the fact that her little friend was not there. She had also not managed to get a letter to Mary as she had hoped she would. She was out here, without the few friends she had.

Nell tried to be satisfied, remembering that she had come here because she needed to get away. It was a cruel joke that she now missed home so badly and wanted to return. As she played her mournful song, she pushed away the desire to go back.

It was nonsense, and she was tired of folly. She would not give in to it any longer, but rather she would push forward in the hopes that everything would fall into place and she could be happy here.

With the swirling emotions that clashed against one another, Nell realised that she simply did not know what she wanted. It was a difficult place to be. Her entire life, all she wanted was to play music and have more freedom. But now, she had those things, and she wanted so much more.

Now, her wants and desires contradicted one another, and she didn't know what to think about the days ahead.

Nell opened her eyes and saw that a squirrel seemed intrigued by the sounds coming from the Bower. She smiled to herself, glad that despite missing Daisy, she was making a new animal friend. At least she was not as alone as she had thought.

Nell spent an hour outside before her mother came home and asked for her help with making dinner. Nell checked on her grandmother and saw that she was still resting, so mother and daughter made dinner together, and it was another opportunity for Nell to have a decent distraction.

"What do you think? Do you like it out here?" her mother asked.

"It is beautiful. I am realising that it is not so easy to run away from pain, simply trying to go somewhere new. But I am glad that we have come, and I hope that I can let go of my sadness if we stay for a few days or more," she said.

“Of course, darling. I was thinking we could stay for a week or two, even. Would that help?” her mother asked. Nell chewed her lip, considering the question.

She still didn’t have an answer. She had thought it would help to come out here but was finding it much more difficult. So what did that mean for her? And what if she decided that it was best if she didn’t go home after all? What if she just stayed here forever?

Chapter 30

Daniel had heartily agreed to help Henry as soon as Henry had the chance to tell him everything that had happened.

“I am confident that my father was involved in this. It makes little sense that the very thing he wanted is now coming to pass. I know him. He is just the sort of man who would do anything to get what he wanted, and I believe that he had made every effort to interfere with this situation to ensure that I cannot proceed in my plan to marry Miss Hawkins.

I think he drafted the letter for her. He may have even had one of the maids rewrite it in feminine penmanship,” Henry said, thinking through all of the ways his father could have made this happen.

“If it is true, and your father is behind this, you most certainly need to find Miss Hawkins and tell her what is going on. She will understand, and I am sure she will allow you to make things right. It is so clear that she loves you; you simply need the chance to show her that you were not guilty of lying to her, to begin with. Come, we must make haste and ask Mary about it all. She may have an idea about what to do next,” Daniel suggested.

“She was unaware that Miss Hawkins had left. Maybe Miss Hawkins has returned, I do not know. Perhaps she was simply gone for the day. But it would be unusual. Why would she have gone without Mary? Unless her mother took her to town,” Henry said, still trying to imagine the possibilities.

“I am sure that is all it was. So let us go to Mary, ask her advice about how you might approach Miss Hawkins to get her to listen, and then

we will go to her. If she is home, then perhaps Mary will come with us and begin the conversation so that Miss Hawkins will trust you enough to listen. What do you say?" Daniel asked.

"I think it is a wise idea. You are right," he said with a sigh.

With that decided, the two men went out and rode to Hartville. It was clear to Henry that Daniel was eager to see Mary, which made him happy, but he was still grieving for himself. He just wanted to find Miss Hawkins.

When they reached Mary's home, Daniel went to the door to speak with her, but Henry watched as Mary came outside with a frightened look on her face.

"What is it?" Henry asked, sensing that something was very wrong.

Mary stood with her arms wrapped tightly across her chest, looking nervous and worried, fidgeting uncomfortably.

"It is Nell. I wish I had something better to tell you, but the fact is, she is gone," she said.

"What?" Henry asked, flustered by this. He had spent the whole morning convincing himself that Miss Hawkins would be at her home when he got there. But now, Mary was telling a very different story. "She and her mother simply vanished. Overnight. I have no idea where they went or when they will return. Many of their things are still at the house, so I expect they must come back eventually. But I have heard nothing, and Nell did not even leave me a note to tell me

she was going. That is very unlike her,” Mary said.

Henry tried not to panic, but he was deeply worried, even more so now than he had been before.

“Have you asked about them?” Daniel asked her. “Does anyone know anything? Is there anyone who might have seen them?”

“No one,” Mary replied, shaking her head. “I asked many people throughout the town. Although not many of them know Nell all that well, they do know her mother. But nobody has seen her.

She is not in town selling her baked treats as she used to. And it is clear at the house that no one has been back for days. I have nothing more to tell you aside from the fact that I am terribly worried.”

Henry felt dizzy and overwhelmed, not sure what to do. He couldn't believe this. Miss Hawkins had to be safe. He didn't know what he would do if something had happened to her. And why had her mother vanished?

Maybe he was wrong, and his father hadn't been involved in any of this. Perhaps her mother had written the note as an excuse to take her away. What if she had lied about all of this and had Nell in a cage somewhere? Was it not enough to keep her trapped in this home? Had she trapped her elsewhere?

“Maybe we can all go to the house together. I tried to look around, but I saw no signs of where they might have gone. Perhaps if we all go, you will find something that I did not,” Mary suggested.

Henry nodded.

“Yes, let us do that. Anything to find her,” he said.

They made their way to the house and went inside, with Mary leading the way.

“Nell? Mrs. Hawkins?” Mary called.

They were met with pure silence and the same eerie quality that Henry had sensed when he came two days before. It was obvious that something was very wrong, and he didn’t know what it might be. He just had to be patient and search the home for a sign of what had happened and where Miss Hawkins had gone.

“I will search Nell’s room and her mother’s,” Mary said, reminding them of propriety. “Lord Comran, you may search the kitchen, and Lord Collins, you ought to have a look in the parlour.”

“Yes, of course,” Henry said. He made his way down the hall to the parlour and went inside. His eyes were immediately drawn back to the mantelpiece where he had found the letter before, the one that had been written by his nonexistent betrothed.

But there had to be some other clue, didn’t there? Something he had missed before? He was hopeful that, this time, they would find something. He had help now, and that was all he needed.

Henry searched through the piles of carving tools and other assorted items kept neatly organised in baskets in one corner. He smiled to himself, thinking how most women would keep patterns for stitching

or ribbons for other projects. But Miss Hawkins was not like other women.

After a little while, Mary came into the parlour to check on him.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Nothing. I am looking through everything I can find, but I have found nothing yet. I expect it is going to take me a while,” he said.

“Yes, probably so. I searched Mary’s room, but there was nothing to alert me to her whereabouts. A few instruments were missing, so wherever she went, she took them,” she said.

“How many? Which ones?” Henry asked.

“The Bower, the Belute, and that other one that looks like a drum. Her three favourites. I expect that she knew she would be gone long enough that she would need to have them with her. But she did not take the others, which means she will probably be coming back,” Mary explained.

Henry sighed with relief, hoping she was right. But even if Miss Hawkins was going to return, there was no way of knowing when that might be. He wanted to speak with her as soon as possible before she could find someone else to love or anyone who might sweep her away.

He continued his search of the room when Daniel came in with a sigh.

“Nothing in the kitchen either. Aside from some very tasty bread that is going to get stale very soon. I think they must have forgotten about it,” he said.

“Well, stale bread is not going to help us find them. It seems there is nothing here to help us,” Henry said, making his way over to the desk.

He started looking around when he saw a paper discarded in the little waste receptacle beside the desk.

Henry bent down and pulled it out, looking at the paper that had a large ink stain. It was a letter. Someone had been writing a letter and spilled ink all over it before tossing it, presumably to write a new letter.

Henry tried to read the words that were still intact.

Dear Mothe

Eleanor and Ivisi

hope you do nomind

we should be the

is very sad

We will

soon.

Your daught

Leah

“Mary! Daniel! Come here!” Henry shouted.

“I am already here,” Daniel said, standing beside him.

“Will you look at this? This is what we needed,” Henry said with excitement.

“What is all the commotion? Did you find something?” Mary asked, rushing into the room.

“An ink-stained letter? What is this? I cannot even read it,” Daniel said.

“Look closer. You just need to discern what is being said. It would seem that Mrs Hawkins was writing to her mother about a visit with her daughter. They were going to see her. Can you not understand?

That is what this letter is saying,” Henry insisted.

“Are you quite sure? How can you even read this?” Daniel asked.

“Look at the whole words and then the partial. That is clearly what it is trying to say. They were going to visit Mrs Hawkins’s mother. You see?” Henry asked.

Mary took the letter from Daniel, and she began to smile.

“That is most certainly what it says. Goodness, Lord Collins, you are a genius! And look! The address! It is untouched on the back. We can still read it. It is addressed to her mother in Glendale. That is a few hours north, is it not? I remember Nell saying something about her grandmother who lived up north,” Mary said.

“Indeed, it is. And we can make it there before nightfall, I think,” Henry said.

“Are you sure? I am not convinced we will get there in time. We ought to go tomorrow,” Daniel suggested.
Henry shook his head.

“I cannot wait another moment,” he told them.

Daniel started to speak, but Henry held up a hand to silence him. There was a noise outside, one that made Henry gasp.

“Daisy,” he said.

“What?” Daniel asked.

“You hear that? The chirping? That is Daisy, Miss Hawkins’s sparrow,” he said.

“It is a bird, Henry. You do not know it is exactly that same bird,” Daniel said.

“No,” Henry said with a grin. “I am sure of it. She must be lost without Miss Hawkins, missing her. Come, let us get the little bird, and we will go at once.”

“You are going to ride a horse with a bird?” Daniel asked.

“Actually, I think it is best we take a coach at this juncture. There are the three of us, and we simply need to get there. It is a longer journey than I want to take by horseback. Come,” he insisted, hoping they could get there in a better fashion via coach with a driver who knew where he was going. If they went on horseback, they had greater risks of being delayed.

Henry rushed outside and saw Daisy perched beside the stone porch, and he held out his index finger. The little bird hopped up, and Henry smiled, relieved that Daisy was so trusting. He only hoped that Miss Hawkins would prove to be as trusting and that she would listen to him this time.

With that, they made their way back into town to find someone who could drive them by coach to Glendale. Henry finally had hope in his heart again, but it was mixed with anxiety the likes of which he had never felt before.

The time had come, and he would see her soon. He only hoped that she would listen. And if not?

He might lose her forever.

Chapter 31

Nell was sitting alone in her grandmother's library with a book in hand. But her eyes would not focus on the words on the page. Instead, she stared out the window, looking out over the meadow that rested just beyond the home.

It was wonderful to see where her grandmother lived and enjoy getting to spend time at the house. It was not much larger than Nell and her mother's cottage, but her grandmother cluttered it with books and trinkets.

There were sewing supplies sprawled throughout the house, as her grandmother loved to sew more than anything. The kitchen was filled with pots and pans, so full that one could not walk through the kitchen without knocking some pile over.

Her grandmother was an eccentric, but lovely woman. She enjoyed reading the gossip from London but scarcely involved herself in any form of society. In all, Nell realised how easy it had been for her mother to keep Nell restricted at home. After all, this life of isolation was simply what she was used to.

Strange it was, however, that her grandmother—a woman who cared nothing for the company of others—enjoyed the society pages so much. Nell had never seen them before, and her mother groaned when her grandmother had first shown them to Nell.

“Mother, you cannot be serious. My daughter does not need to know about the nonsense those silly little fools in London get up to,” Nell's mother had complained.

But Nell had laughed along with her grandmother when looking at them, and now, when her grandmother came into the library to interrupt Nell's staring out the window, it was the society pages she carried.

"Come, dear. I had to get flour in town, and I gathered the new pages," her grandmother said with a mischievous grin.

"You know that Mother does not want me looking at those. She said it will only send me into further sadness to be reminded of men like those ones for whom I cared," Nell warned, although she hoped it would not stop her grandmother from sharing them.

"Oh, piffle!" her grandmother exclaimed. "You and I both know that this is the best entertainment we shall have out here. I know you brought a few of your instruments, but you cannot play mournful songs all day long. Nor read those Greek tragedies at all times like the one in your hands."

Nell looked at the book she held. In truth, she hadn't really been reading it, but her grandmother was right. She didn't want to lull herself into further sadness. There was something addictive about misery, and Nell realised that she was the perfect candidate for falling into such a thing.

She didn't want to be the kind of woman who gave in to sadness, but it seemed she had no choice just now. Sadness abounded, and it would not release her from its grasp.

"Here, child. It is always a relief to read about this or that scandal and how some wealthy young woman has managed to overcome the trite rules of society just as they wish to tear her down," her grandmother said.

Thus far, Nell had only seen the society pages ruin a woman's reputation, but her grandmother assured her that in a matter of months, they would be announcing that same woman's engagement, and she would reign victorious after whatever threatened her. It was difficult to believe, but Nell decided to trust her grandmother.

"Do you really think there is hope to be found here, Grandmother? I often feel as though this world is meant to tear a woman down, no matter her station in society," Nell confessed.

"Indeed, my dear. It often feels that way. But you should remember that there is hope to be had. I found happiness with your grandfather until his passing, and your mother found happiness with your father.

Of course, there is more joy in life than simply finding a husband and getting married, but it is rather exciting nevertheless," her grandmother said.

"How am I to find a decent husband if I am always locked away?" Nell asked although she wasn't sure she would ever have any desire to risk her heart again after all this.

"Well, I have spoken with your mother about that. I do fear that her desperation to protect you shall actually prevent you from ever having the opportunity to find a decent husband, and I have told her as much.

I know that she is trying, harder than you may realise, to let go of her insistence upon protecting you. She loves you very much ... but she finally understands the need to give you freedom," her grandmother said.

Nell was relieved to hear this. Even if she never had the courage to find a husband, she had experienced too much excitement now to go back to life stuck at the cottage. The little bit of freedom she'd been allowed to go into town with Mary had been difficult for her mother, but it was still not as much as Nell wanted.

There were days when she didn't think she could bear to stay at home any longer. And until her mother was willing to give her the freedom she needed, she realised that she would not be content or have any peace.

At the same time, Nell was grateful that her mother had tried to protect her. If Nell had listened to that wisdom, she might never have been forced to go through this pain. But it still didn't seem right or fair that she should be going through it now.

She had always been a good child. She had been obedient. And yet, here she was, stuck in this moment of having to accept that she simply could not overcome the pain she was going through.

She had done everything she was asked, but the moment she deviated, she had her heart broken by the only man she had ever allowed herself to interact with.

Maybe, if she had just sent him away that very first day, she never would have gone through this. She would be home, discontent with being caged, but at least not in this pain she currently felt.

"My dear? I know it is difficult, but you must have hope. And if you think you will never have joy again, I can assure you that you will. One day, you will understand that all this happened so you could find the right man and—more importantly—so that you could know yourself," her grandmother said.

Nell pursed her lips. She already knew herself. She was tired of feeling as though no one else knew her. That was where her real trouble was at.

Her grandmother handed her the papers and then patted the top of her hand. Nell understood that this meant her grandmother was finished with her little encouraging speech, and she was likely to go off and bake or sew or enjoy some other activity for which she was known.

Nell opened the paper and began to read, seeing the gossip about Lady Annabeth Crawley, who was being courted by Lord Hawthorne but had been spotted in Covent Garden with Lord Morton, who had been seen giving her a rose.

It truly was a trite thing that this woman's romantic options should be the discussion of all of London. At that moment, Nell really was grateful that she was not from an elite family like this.

But she continued reading through, finding a strange sort of entertainment in the lives of these others. And when she came upon a section discussing a ball that had taken place just days before, she was suddenly struck by what she saw.

At the Smithson Ball on the 14th of June, many gathered to celebrate the engagement of Lord Hanover and Lady Whiley. Among the attendees were Lord Covington, Lord Monroe, and the much sought-after bachelor, Lord Henry Collins, the future Earl of Rosewell.

Nell's skin went cold. She read through the passage again. Could it be?

Was he really declared a bachelor in these pages?

Confused and desperate, Nell continued reading through the section, hoping for another mention of Lord Collins. She was disappointed to see nothing more. As she continued through to the end of the society pages, still there was no other word spoken about him.

All she had discovered was that he was a bachelor. And if he was a bachelor, there was no betrothed in his life.

Nell had been lied to. She didn't know who had written the letters, claiming to be his intended, but they were simply not true. Lord Collins was not spoken for, and whoever had declared otherwise had been a liar. She had the evidence here, before her very eyes.

Nell couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe that she had been fooled or that there had been such a trap set for her. Was it possible that Lord Collins was, indeed, a free man? Was it possible that she had believed a lie that was only meant to trap her and keep them apart?

Hopeful that she had just discovered the most wonderful news, Nell stood from the chair and readied herself to run to her mother and grandmother for help. But just as the thought crossed her mind, she sat down again, immediately discouraged and wary of the idea that she might go to them.

It was certainly possible that her mother was behind all this. Her mother had not approved of Lord Collins. She had not wanted Nell to be with him. She had not even wanted Nell to speak with him. It was certainly possible that her mother had decided to write these letters to deter Nell from her feelings for him.

And since the handwriting had not been her mother's and the letter had been sent to them through the post, it was possible that Nell's mother had enlisted her grandmother to actually make it happen.

After all, her grandmother did not approve of Nell's interest in a nobleman either. Although she was fascinated with the society pages, she had seen the pain Nell's mother experienced and didn't want Nell to endure the same.

It was all very difficult to think about, but Nell was now certain someone had come up with these lies. She knew that it would not be Mary or Lord Comran. Who else knew about her interest in Lord Collins? There was no one else who could have done this, and she knew it was neither of those two.

Indeed, it had to be her mother behind all this. And now, Nell had allowed her mother to take her even further away from Lord Collins than they were already. There was no way to get a message to him, no way to ask him if she could see him.

Her mother hated nobles, but Nell had thought she would at least soften upon realising that Nell was truly in love. She hadn't thought that her mother would go out of her way to force Nell to give up on him like this. It was cruel, and Nell couldn't believe her mother would actually put her in a position of feeling the same pain that she had gone through. She needed to know the truth at once.

That evening as they all sat down to dinner, Nell figured she had her one and only chance to try and get answers without revealing that she knew it was all a lie. If her mother were behind this, here would be her opportunity to reveal the truth—or carry out her lie. Nell would have to decide on moving forward based on how her mother and

grandmother might respond.

“It looks lovely, Grandmother,” Nell said, sitting at the table in front of a glorious array of vegetables, all cooked in different ways.

“I hope you enjoy it. There is bread as well,” her grandmother said, bringing it over in a basket.

“Thank you,” Nell said.

“Have you had a nice afternoon, darling?” Nell’s mother asked, a soft smile on her face, clearly trying to be cautious after all that Nell had been through of late. If it was true that her mother was behind all this, Nell was furious at the caution and the false care that her mother had exhibited as they all mourned with Nell through her despair and loss.

“I have, thank you. I was able to read the society pages, and it was as entertaining as Grandmother claims,” Nell said, displaying a stoicism that she had not usually been able to muster.

Her mother scoffed and shook her head as she scooped leafy greens onto her plate next to the boiled potatoes.

“I told you that it would not be fun to be one amongst those people,” her mother said.

“Indeed, you are right, Mother. I would never wish to live my life so visibly. But it was interesting. It is strange how quickly you learn to

separate the truth from the lies,” Nell said.

“Oh? Such as when a young woman claims to be virtuous and then it comes out that she has gone away from England for nine months under the guise of gaining culture and returns looking somewhat bloated and depressed?” her mother asked bitterly.

“There is much more to it than that,” her grandmother insisted.

“Indeed. You may find that the pages are more revealing than that. You learn who is engaged and who is not, what rumours are started, and how they end,” Nell said. “You even learn whether or not you have been told lies that could break your heart.”

Her mother cocked her head and drew her brows together in curiosity.

“What do you mean, Eleanor? Was there something regarding your gentleman?” her mother asked, her expression shifting more to surprise.

“You mean to tell me that you do not know?” Nell asked, her tone hard and angry.

At that, her mother and grandmother looked at each other in genuine concern and then back to Nell.

“Darling, I have no idea what you are speaking of, but if something has happened, please tell us. What did you read? What sort of lies have been told? And is it something that, once revealed, will make you happy?”

Nell was the most surprised of them all. She'd been certain that her mother was behind all this. But, if it turned out that she was wrong, maybe her mother was the one who could help her make it right.

Chapter 32

Henry was desperate to reach Miss Hawkins. He couldn't bear the trip taking so long, and he sped up as quickly as possible, needing to get to her before her mother poisoned her against him any further. Of course, he would not be positive that it had been her mother, but it made the most sense.

"Can he not go any faster?" Henry asked in frustration. The rain poured around them, but still, they were racing through the rain and mud.

"If we wanted to go faster, we ought to have ridden ourselves," Daniel replied gently.

Henry knew Daniel was right. They had taken the coach because of the bird and thinking it would be more comfortable for Mary at such a distance. If they'd taken their own horses, they could have gone faster, but it would have been at the sacrifice of riding for hours on horseback instead of the comfort of the coach.

Moreover, being drenched when he showed up at the house would not have been how he wanted to present himself. If he was going to beg her mother for her hand in marriage, he needed to be presentable for the moment.

Still, Henry wished that he had thought it through before this. He would have let Daniel and Mary come by coach with the bird, and he should have ridden horseback on his own, racing through the night if need be.

As it was, they were still hours away from reaching the house, and he didn't know how much more he could take. Soon enough, he would

burst from his need to get to Miss Hawkins.

Daniel turned and looked out the window along the back of the coach, peering with interest at something behind them. Henry scooted over to give Daniel more space.

“What is it?” Henry asked.

“I am sure it is nothing,” Daniel replied, brushing it off without interest.

But Henry was dubious, thinking that Daniel was certainly trying to keep something from him. Henry wondered what it could be, but he was frightened to ask, thinking that, whatever it was, he probably didn’t want to know. There was already so much going on, how could he think about anything else?

He focused on the sparrow, which sat nestled in his hand. It was so strange to hold such a delicate, living creature. What was more astonishing was how comfortable the bird was in his hand, how she barely seemed to notice the movement or the chaos that surrounded her.

She was utterly at peace as if she knew with certainty that Henry would keep her safe, that he was bringing her back to the woman she was closest to.

“That little bird likes you,” Daniel said.

“Nell is going to be so relieved that you are bringing Daisy. I cannot imagine why she did not bring her. More than likely, Daisy had been out looking for food or something when Nell left. Otherwise, I can think of nothing that would have stopped the bird from going with her,” Mary said.

“Yes, I was rather worried when I saw that Daisy was at the house, alone. I want Miss Hawkins to know that she is safe and that I am taking good care of her. But, more than that, I just want Miss Hawkins to have the bird she cares for so deeply,” Henry said.

There was certainly more to it than that, however. He knew that Miss Hawkins considered this bird to be one of her dearest friends. It seemed wrong that she should have to be without the sparrow. He couldn’t imagine that Miss Hawkins had left her behind willingly.

Once more, Daniel looked out the window behind them and appeared to be rather uneasy. Henry couldn’t imagine what it was that had bothered his friend so much.

“What is it, Daniel? Clearly, there is something amiss,” Henry noted.

Daniel hesitated and bit his lip as though he was frightened to admit to what was bothering him. But Henry was not going to let go of the question, and he looked at Daniel intensely, trying to make his friend realise that there was no reason to hide anything from him.

“Please, just come out with it,” Henry urged.

“Back there. Do you see it? There is a coach not far behind us,” Daniel

said.

Henry turned and looked, squinting through the rain that ran down the window. Indeed, a decent pace behind them, there was a coach. It was going at a similar pace as they were, faster than normal and with urgency. It was strange, but Henry knew there were any number of coaches out along the road. He didn't know why Daniel should be worried about this one.

"Yes? So there is another coach out there. Why are you upset?" Henry asked.

"That coach has been behind us practically since we left Hartville. That was nearly four hours ago. It has not deviated, and it has kept its pace. At times, it was even nearer to us, and then it has fallen back, but only for a moment. I think they mean to keep up with us, even to catch us. I think they are trying to follow us at the very least," Daniel said.

Henry wondered if that were possible, but he couldn't imagine why anyone would do that. It made no sense that someone would be chasing after them. Who would have a mind to catch them and why?

He wondered for a moment if they had been wrong about Miss Hawkins and her mother. Was it possible that her mother was the one coming after them? Could she be trying to stop them if only Miss Hawkins had gone to her grandmother's and her mother had stayed behind and saw them making their way after her daughter like this?

Henry squinted, looking back at the coach to try and get a decent look at it or at least at the driver, but he could not see clearly. The sky was darkening, little by little, and there was no way to tell exactly who was at the helm of the coach, driving the horses onward. Moreover, he

didn't know that Mrs Hawkins would make the effort to hire a coach in pursuit of them.

She had no horses of her own, but would she come after them in this way? It made very little sense to do so. She would have no reason and had probably already warned her mother against Henry's arrival in case it came to that.

What he did note was that Daniel was right. The coach was clearly trying to catch up to them. If it had been doing so for nearly four hours, Henry was relieved that they did not seem to be able to bridge the distance, but he also wondered who was so motivated to reach them that they would go through all this trouble.

"Henry, who could it be?" Daniel asked.

Henry sighed, shaking his head. He knew in his heart that Mrs Hawkins was not the only person it might be, but he did not want to confess aloud who else might be behind them. It was dreadful to consider, but he knew the possibility remained. He needed to accept that he just might be unfortunate enough to have to face his worst fear at that moment.

"I can think of only two possibilities," he said. "Either Miss Hawkins's mother or my own father. Whoever it may be, I can imagine that this is not going to go well. If we are followed like this, they surely have some agenda, some reason to wish us caught or stopped."

"Do you really think it could be your father? Could he have been the one to send the letters to Miss Hawkins? Do you think he believed that telling her you are engaged would stop her from wanting to marry you?" Daniel asked.

"I know my father well," Henry replied. "And I would not be surprised in the least if he decided to do so. He has every reason to prevent this from becoming a marriage. You know what he is like. He is passionately against the idea of marrying a woman who is not noble like us."

Mary looked down in shame at those words, and Henry felt awful for having said them aloud. He didn't want her to think that he, too, would look down on a union such as the one that existed between Mary and Daniel.

"Mary," Henry said quietly.

She looked up at him hesitantly.

"You know that my father's beliefs are not my own, yes? I would never think poorly of Miss Hawkins or you. I would never look down upon a marriage between classes, and I think it is nonsense that anyone should," he said.

"I certainly hope not. I know that Nell loves you. You are going out of your way to be with her, and you have sworn to fight for your ability to be with her. But your father must face his own prejudice because, if I know anything about Nell, she will push her mother to do the same," Mary said.

Henry hoped as much. He hadn't seen Miss Hawkins push against her mother's wishes much, but he knew that Mary knew better than he did. Miss Hawkins was certainly strong. Perhaps she was more willing to demand her autonomy than he realised.

“Henry, we still do not know what this means for us. And whether it is your father or Mrs Hawkins, there is much you will have to do in order to push against them and have the life you are trying to have,” Daniel reminded him.

“I know that. We just have to keep trying,” Henry said, not having any answers for their plight.

“What are we to do? They have not caught us yet, but that does not mean they will not,” Daniel said with urgency.

“I know. And we have very few options, but I cannot think what might happen if they reach us. We have no choice but to urge the driver to go faster,” Henry said.

“He is already going as fast as the horses are able. Clearly these are better than whoever is chasing after us, but that does not change the fact that we will be caught if we slow even a little. Henry, we are in earnest. Is it possible for you to ride ahead?” Daniel asked.

Henry thought about it for a moment. Could he have the driver stop in a town somewhere? Could he find a horse and convince someone to let him take it just for the day?

No, that was nonsense. He could not do anything quickly enough to get away before the coach caught up to them. He would only create further problems by attempting such a feat. With the chaos of the storm, it would be even more difficult to get through without the coach for cover.

And for the moment, he had more than enough problems getting in the way of his goal to reach Miss Hawkins and tell her the truth before she spent the rest of her life believing that he did not love her, that he thought so little of her that he was willing to cast her aside without a fight.

“It is not an option,” he answered Daniel. “It would only slow me down if I were to try. I would end up behind that coach and have to catch up and attempt to pass it.

The best thing is for us to ride hard and reach Miss Hawkins’s grandmother’s home before they can catch us. We are still hours away, and my hope is that they tire out, that they will grow weary of this chase.”

“If they are determined enough to have chased after us these past four hours, I hardly think they will be bothered by another hour or so. We are getting closer, Henry. While that is good for us, it also means there is less of an opportunity to leave them behind.

You had best make a decision as to what you will do if they get there before us, or if they reach us and we can no longer stay ahead of them,” Daniel warned.

Henry looked at the little bird in his hands, wondering how he was going to best ensure that Miss Hawkins would hear him out. But as he was thinking, Mary leaned forward, looking at him intently.

“Lord Collins, I know that you love Nell, but you still have not told me what exactly you intend to do about all this,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you are going to her to explain yourself and how much you care for her, but what of it? What do you expect to come out of all this? How are you going to convince your mother that she ought to let you court Nell?”

And how are you going to get around the expectations of society to do so? Have you thought about it at all?” Mary challenged him.

Of course he had thought about it. It consumed his every waking moment. All he could think about was how he would convince everyone around him that it was good and right that he and Miss Hawkins should be together.

“I will beg her mother. I will tell her that I love Miss Hawkins, that I would give anything to marry her,” he said.

“But is that true? She may ask you to give quite a lot,” Mary warned.

“Yes, it is true. I know what my father has threatened, and I know what her mother thinks of men like me. The truth of it is, Miss Hawkins means more to me than all the wealth, the inheritance, the title.

None of that is half so important to me as she is. It has never been the thing I value most in this world, and if I must give it all up to prove that, I will do it,” he declared.

“If you really mean that, if you are willing to give up everything you have to be with her, I hope you are prepared. It is very likely that you will have to do so this very day,” Mary cautioned.

“I know. And if it means that I may propose to her, that I may spend my life with her, I shall send word to my father at once that I renounce my title. I renounce my inheritance. I will live in a cottage in the woods if it means that I may give her all that I have and spend my days as her husband,” he said.

Henry’s heart surged with the truth of his love. He cared about Miss Hawkins more than anything else, and he would prove it. And if no one wanted to let them be together, regardless of his willingness to give it all up, he would ask her to run away with him, even if it meant they had to disappear.

Would she be willing to do that? Would she be willing to leave everything she knew behind? It was an awful lot for him to ask of her. Henry didn’t think it was fair. He didn’t want her to have to give up her own life for him. But if that was what it came down to, he couldn’t help believing that she would do it.

For him.

Chapter 33

The garden was full of flora and fauna alike. Deer ate from trees full of ripe apples and pears. Squirrels collected acorns and stuffed them in their cheeks. Lavender bloomed, producing the most glorious scent. Rose bushes hedged the bare patch of earth in the centre, where Nell sat with Lord Collins.

There was a hazy glow around them as the sun shone through the trees. Nell played her Bower, filling the air with glorious music, a song of hope and longing, a song of dreams captured and made real. All the while, Lord Collins sat beside her, his eyes closed, lulled into a deep, contented sleep. A sweet smile on his face told Nell that this was all he wanted. This was not only her dream, but his as well.

In the midst of his sleep, he reached out and took Nell's hand. She let go of the instrument, but the music played on, echoing in the forest that surrounded their little garden. As he gripped her hand more tightly, a bright light shone forth and soon enveloped the entire scene.

Nell woke with a start, gasping from the shocking transition between the beautiful, bright garden and the darkness of her room.

She was alone. An ache started in her chest and sat heavily, weighing Nell down even more. She grieved the sudden loss of Lord Collins. He was so close to her, so real. The sadness of his absence was worse than she could have imagined. But there was nothing to be done. He wasn't there, and she had no way of getting him back, no matter what she tried to do.

Nell wanted to return to her dream and fancied, for a moment, that she might be able to find him again if she closed her eyes and pictured the garden as she fell back to sleep. But now, her mind was awake, too alert to give her the mercy of rest.

She couldn't escape the feeling of him being ripped away, so she decided to get up and try to distract herself. First, Nell went to the window and looked out to see if there was any sign of the sun or if it was gone since she'd laid down to rest that afternoon.

There, in the distance, she could see the blackness of night turning to a bruised purple. Indeed, the sun had faded and was nearly gone for the night.

Nell wanted to speak with her mother and grandmother. It seemed the night before that they had nothing to do with the letter, and they thought this was all just a mistake. Her mother had warned her that, most likely, he really was engaged.

She'd said that the society pages were probably unaware of it, or they had made a mistake. Perhaps they had even been referring to another man and had placed his name in there by mistake.

But Nell's mother wouldn't even look at the pages or see what Nell was referring to. Her mother didn't want to hear anything about Lord Collins. In fact, Nell hadn't even told her mother his name.

Her mother always referred to him as *the nobleman* or *the man who tried to court you* rather than being willing to discuss him freely. It had caused Nell to cower in some ways, unwilling to speak of him as she wanted.

Now, however, things were different. And after that dream, Nell was not going to sit by anymore. She wanted to know what was happening, and she would not allow her mother to continue suggesting that Lord Collins was guilty of anything. It was desperately unfair.

He had done nothing of which to be found guilty, and Nell was furious that her mother could not see the truth. She was so bitter against noblemen that, even as she claimed to want more freedom for Nell, she was unwilling to demonstrate any.

It was exhausting, and Nell was tired of pretending that she understood her mother. There was no more reason to put up with this nonsense when all Nell wanted was the chance to be with the man she loved.

She didn't believe that the society pages had been wrong. She didn't believe that he had a betrothed whom he had kept secret. But Nell also didn't believe that her mother had been responsible for the letters. It seemed to her that, despite her mother's poor view of Lord Collins, she hadn't been the one to go out of her way to cause this. She had seemed very surprised by Nell's accusations.

Nell decided to start making supper, not sure how long it would be until her mother and grandmother returned from their trip into town. She made tea for herself to start with and then got to work on a hearty dinner that would be enough to fill them all.

By the time her mother, yawning, made her way into the kitchen, Nell had everything ready.

"Here you are, Mother," she said in a cold voice.

Her mother looked at her in surprise, but before she could say another word, Nell's grandmother came in.

“Oh, how delightful! You have already cooked for us?” she asked.

“Indeed, I have. And I need to speak with you both. This dinner is not merely out of a child’s duty. It is because I have something very urgent to discuss,” Nell said.

“Good heavens, is this about your nobleman again?” her mother asked in dismay.

“Mother, I know you believe that he is guilty of all that he has been accused of in those letters, but I do not. You never met him. He is not the sort of man who would use a woman in such a way. Honestly, he is good and true and noble in character—not merely in wealth,” Nell said, pleading with them to listen to her.

“Very well, my dear, say what it is you must say. I can see there is nothing that will dissuade you,” her mother said.

Nell held her head high, determined that she would have her opportunity to share precisely what was on her mind. It was of the utmost importance that she share what she wanted and needed. Now, more than ever, Nell wanted to find out the truth, and she was determined that they would help her find it.

“Mother, I know that you are dubious in regards to what I have found in the society pages. You have made it perfectly clear that you think it is still possible that he is engaged. But I need you to hear me when I tell you that I do not believe it for a moment.

He would never lie to me about that, and it is not simply naivety that leads me to this conclusion. It is the fact that he is truly a good man,” Nell began.

She could see that her mother was still not convinced. She clearly thought Nell was just being childish, but Nell was not ready to give in.

“What this leads me to is the fact that I need to know who it was that lied to me. If it was not either of you, then who was it? Who is it who worked so hard to make me believe that he was already betrothed to someone? I cannot believe that it was simply a fool who wanted to keep us apart. It must have been someone with a goal,” she continued.

“And what sort of goal might that have been? Who else would want to keep you apart? I cannot imagine why you are so convinced that this was all a lie simply because of one little thing in a society page, but if you are determined that there is a lie in the midst of this, I urge you to tread cautiously,” her mother said.

“I shall, but I also must find out the truth. I need to know what is going on, and I cannot possibly find out by remaining here,” she said.

“So you wish to go back home to the cottage? Or straight to London? What is it you want?” her mother asked, clearly wanting to avoid these options.

“I simply want to figure out who it could have been. I do not know how we are meant to discover it, but perhaps if I speak with Mary, she may speak with Lord Comran who would know,” Nell said.

“That is his friend? The one Mary is so fond of?” her mother asked.

“Indeed,” Nell replied.

“And you think that he would be willing to tell you the honest truth rather than defend his dearest friend? You think you can trust him?” her mother asked.

“I am certain of it. He is a good man, and he loves Mary. It is clear when you see the two of them together. I know that he will tell her the truth,” Nell said.

Her mother sighed and shook her head.

“I thought you would understand by now that you cannot trust these men, Eleanor. Mary cannot trust Lord Comran any more than you can trust this fool who tried to steal your heart. I do not want you getting hurt because you have believed another man who is just as cruel as the one who betrayed you,” her mother said.

“But Mother—”

“Nell, dearie,” her grandmother interjected. “Have you considered that, perhaps, he is not yet engaged, but there is a young woman whose family has been working to arrange the match?”

He may have been considered a bachelor in the society pages merely because the courtship has not yet been finalised and publicly declared an engagement. It is possible,” her grandmother said hesitantly.

“I know what I am talking about,” Nell insisted. “He would have told me if there was any hint of another woman. I just know it.”

Her mother sighed and exchanged a look with Nell's grandmother. She could see they did not believe this was justified at all, that they thought Nell was a fool for having any hope whatsoever.

But she would not give in. She would not let go. She knew Lord Collins, and she trusted him. Just because her mother had foolishly believed a man without solid character did not mean that Nell was doing the same. No, she knew in her heart that he was a better man than they could possibly know.

"Would you please just listen to me?" Nell begged. "Please, just pretend for a moment that you believe me. Pretend that you think I am right, that you care about what I think in all this. Please, just let me do what I must in case I am right."

Once more, her mother and grandmother exchanged a glance, only this time, it was far more sympathetic. This time, Nell thought they might actually be willing to listen to her and hear out her thoughts and the plan she was trying to form in her mind.

"Nell, you are clearly determined that this is the right thing and, if so, we want to support you. We want to trust that you know this man better than we ever could.

You have to understand how difficult it is for us to trust him when we know nothing about him, and we only know that he is the sort of man who is willing to see you behind my back," her mother said.

"Moreover, you know that I find it difficult to trust him because of my own past with men such as him. Nevertheless, I want you to have the freedom to pursue something *if* it is the right thing. I have held you back for far too long.

And if you are right and someone has lied to you, I think it would be good for you to find out the truth, and I can see that you will not be happy until you have had the opportunity to figure out what is going on behind all this,” her mother continued.

Nell was relieved to hear this, relieved that her mother was finally willing to listen and give Nell a chance to share her burden and what was on her mind. Still, she didn’t know how to make them see that there was more to it than that. She wanted them to realise that this was clearly some awful plot.

But until they could discern the truth, Nell figured she simply needed to make them listen long enough that they would see the reality, and she would have a chance to make them know that Lord Collins was every bit as good a man as she had been telling them all along.

“There is one more thing,” her grandmother said before Nell could dive in and share her thoughts.

“Yes, Grandmother? What is it?” she asked.

“I want you to remember that the truth does not mean you have to make a decision right away,” her grandmother said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that this may all be a lie to keep you apart. I mean that he may truly care for you and want to marry you. But that does not mean that you must move forward. It does not mean that you must marry him.

I know you think that he is the man you wish to be with, but there are very grand men around the country who would be far better for you, and I would be more than happy to support you if you chose to pursue a union with any of them rather than this gentleman,” her grandmother said.

Nell was upset and offended but tried to remain calm. She couldn't understand her grandmother. How was it that, even now, in the midst of Nell finally having a chance to share the truth with them, her grandmother was urging her to steer away from a nobleman?

How could her grandmother act this way? She loved to read about the gossip of nobles, but she was determined to stop her granddaughter from ever being happy with one?

It was entirely unfair.

“She is right, Eleanor,” her mother said. “I know you care for him, but that is not enough. And if he cares for you, it still may not be enough. It is very complicated, mixing between the classes.

You would not like to devote yourself to this man, only to discover that he has no love for you. It is better that you give yourself a chance to live a good life with a good man. One who can be everything you need him to be.”

“But he is everything I need and everything I want,” she told them with passion.

“I thought that once as well,” her mother said.

“And I saw her in pain because of it,” her grandmother added.

Nell stood there, between the generations of women who had come before her. They knew more of life than she ever would, and they had experienced more than she had been allowed. But still, Nell realised there was one thing they didn't know.

They didn't know Lord Henry Collins. And without knowing him, they could never imagine the love, the joy, or the wonder that were in Nell's heart. And if they would not help her find a way to be with him, Nell understood that it was only a matter of time before she would have to do it all herself.

Chapter 34

A loud rumble just above the coach startled Henry awake. He had only just begun to fall asleep, and in that briefest of moments, he saw an image in his mind. A stunning garden, surrounded by something like an orchard. He had never seen anything so beautiful.

In the middle, he had seen Miss Hawkins. It was strange how real the dream felt. Henry wished he could return to it, that he could bring her back.

He reminded himself that he was on his way to get her. He would be with her soon enough, and then, when he was, he would make things right. Although it was difficult to let go of such a wonderful dream, the dream would be nothing as compared to the reality of having her by his side. He had to remember what he was truly fighting for.

This was not a dream. It was his life. It was the woman he loved. And he would be with her soon enough.

Henry could see the little house from a distance as lightning cracked through the sky, illuminating the view of the home and the meadow beyond. The thunder roared above them, and he felt Daisy shifting in his hand, clearly startled by the sound.

He wondered how a bird could be startled by the elements of the outdoors and then figured that this bird had likely been so tamed that she wasn't as accustomed to the storms as others might be. For all he knew, Miss Hawkins kept her safe during storms like this, and she had not been forced to push through anything quite like it.

Whatever it was, he was simply glad to have the bird with him and

take good care of her until he could give Daisy back to Miss Hawkins. He hoped that Miss Hawkins would at least be willing to see him, that she would be happy to speak with him, but he would need to convince her of the truth and make sure that she knew he was not engaged.

Still, he feared she might not even hear him out, but he was glad to have Mary with him to at least be the bridge if Miss Hawkins rejected him or denied him entry to the home. If he had to send Mary in his stead, he would do so, but he hated the idea of anyone else begging forgiveness on his behalf. He didn't want anyone else to be the one to explain. He wanted to do so himself.

"We are almost there. You see it up ahead?" Henry asked, pointing it out to Mary and Daniel.

"No, but only because it is dark," Daniel replied.

"The lightning cracked a moment ago, and I saw it. Goodness, we have almost reached it. I hope she allows me in," Henry said, his nerves roiling within him.

"If she does not, you know that I am here. I will be the one to speak with her if I must," Mary promised.

"I am thankful to you for that, but I truly wish to be the one who tells her everything. Honestly, if she is unwilling to see me, I do not know what I will do. I have to convince her to listen to me. I want to marry her and spend my life with her. I cannot think how we might start our life together if she will not even listen to me about this one thing," Henry said, grieving.

“You mustn’t be so upset,” Mary scolded.

“What do you mean?” he asked, wondering why she didn’t see the seriousness of the situation.

“We have not got to that point yet. As it is, you are probably worrying for no reason at all. It is not Nell you will struggle to convince. It is her mother. She is the one who will not want to hear a word from you,” Mary warned.

But just as they were talking about it, the coach pulled to a stop outside the little house.

All was silent for a moment within the coach, save for the pattering of the rain on the rooftop, coming down in rapid little drops as if trying to remind them they could not escape the downpour no matter how they might try.

Henry turned and looked behind them, and there was no sign of the coach that had been following. He wondered if they had managed to get away from it once they had turned onto a smaller road when they’d been far enough ahead of the other coach that they might not have been seen. But then, maybe he was only hoping for that. Maybe there was no chance they would be so fortunate.

Henry heard the coachman’s footsteps, and the door opened. The coachman held his umbrella out for Henry to come underneath, and Henry exited the coach with his heart racing in his chest. He could not believe this was it.

This was the moment he had been waiting for, the moment when he

was going to see Miss Hawkins again. If all went according to plan, he would propose. And if it did not ... he would lose everything he had ever wanted.

Henry nodded to the coachman, who walked him to the front porch and then left Henry to stand there alone. Screwing his courage, he knocked firmly on the door three times with his right hand. In his left, he still held Daisy, who was patiently perched on his palm.

For a long moment, nothing happened, but soon enough, the door opened, and a sweet, elderly woman looked up at him. Her appearance was almost a shock to Henry, seeing the features already so familiar to him in their younger form.

This little woman, stooped by age, was also quite clearly full of personality. He could see even from here, in the dim light, that she had all manner of strange trinkets lining the shelves in the hall behind where she stood.

“Yes?” she prompted, looking him up and down in curiosity.

“I-I am here to see Miss Hawkins,” he said, trying to find his strength. Anxious and wondering what was going to happen, he held his breath.

“Ah ... I see,” she said, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Mother? What is it? Who is there?” asked another voice.
“Hush, Leah. You need not interfere,” the old woman said.

But it was too late. The other woman had already arrived at the door. This woman, likewise, looked very much like Miss Hawkins and Henry knew that this must be her mother. They had the same chin and nose, the same brow shape as well. There was no doubt that these were three generations of women who had a very strong resemblance.

“Mrs Hawkins, I presume?” Henry asked. “I am here to see your daughter.”

Mrs Hawkins pursed her lips and looked him up and down just as her mother had. She did not appear to be overly impressed, and Henry tried not to take it personally. He knew that she must not be fond of him for coming here like this.

“Is that so? And why should I allow you to see her? Is it because you wish to look upon your mistress one more time before you marry a noblewoman?” she asked him with a challenge in her tone.

Henry scoffed, annoyed by the accusation. He couldn't believe that anyone would believe that nonsense. Of course he was not engaged! He loved only one woman, and he was here to prove that. Moreover, he had never done anything to deserve the assumption that he was a lech.

He knew that Mrs Hawkins didn't trust him because he had met up with her daughter behind her back, but that was no reason to accuse him of impropriety or poor intentions.

“Mrs Hawkins, I am not engaged. I have no woman to whom I am betrothed, nor is there any other woman I care for,” he said, the words coming from his lips with notable annoyance. He didn't care to hide that he was displeased by her accusation.

“Is your family aware of that? Are you quite sure they have not arranged for another woman and you are not simply trying to rebel by pursuing the daughter of a pauper? Are you quite certain that you are not merely trying to convince me to get out of your way so you may hurt my daughter further?” she asked.

“I never meant to hurt your daughter. The letters that claimed I am betrothed are a lie. There is no young woman in my life. None. My father has not arranged for anyone either. I am a free man, I assure you. I have no ties to any women,” he swore.

But Mrs Hawkins narrowed her eyes at him and leaned forward.

“Then you must answer another question for me. Am I to allow you to see my daughter when you have never asked my permission before this? Am I to give you leave to see her when you have disregarded me at every turn up until now?” she asked, this time with a different sort of venom in her tone.

Henry leaned back ever so slightly. He realised what this new anger was. She was mad at him for never having considered her approval in his relationship with Miss Hawkins.

He had never asked to meet her or got her permission before he courted her daughter. He had always been working to court Miss Hawkins even without following the proper procedures for approval.

It made sense that she would be angry with him, but Henry couldn't let go. He loved Miss Hawkins. Why would he have waited for her mother to approve when she was not the sort of woman who would willingly concede to something like this?

“Mrs. Hawkins, if I may,” he began. “You are not quick to allow your daughter any sort of freedom. If I wished to get to know Miss Hawkins, as I did, I had to do so in whatever way I was able. You took away my right to seek your permission simply because you did not wish to offer it. I had no choice in the matter.

My only option was to speak with her as I was able and hope that, eventually, you would be willing to give me a chance. Now, I seek that chance. Now, I come to you and beg you to listen to me. I beg you to give me the chance to court your daughter and to marry her.”

Miss Hawkins still looked at him with that distrust in her eyes. Obviously, she had no liking for him, and he was doing nothing to win her over. Henry sensed that he would never find a way to get her on his side, no matter how hard he might try.

Still, he felt that it was imperative that he try. Otherwise, he might not have the opportunity to speak with her daughter.

And even if Miss Hawkins chose not to allow a courtship, he needed her to know that he never lied to her, that he was never engaged to marry another woman.

He had kept no secrets in that regard, and he longed for her to understand that he had only ever loved her.

“I do not know who you are, nor do I want to,” Mrs Hawkins began. “I do not trust you, and I will not allow you to come anywhere near my daughter.”

“Leah ...” her mother said under her breath.

Henry gathered that Miss Hawkins’s grandmother was far more likely to approve of him than Mrs Hawkins was. He wondered if there was any hope in convincing the elder to let him inside.

“Please,” he begged, looking directly at the grandmother. “Please, allow me to come and speak with Miss Hawkins. Allow me to ask her to marry me because I will do whatever I must. I will give up my title, my wealth, everything. All I want is to be with her.”

But Mrs Hawkins scoffed and shifted her weight, so she blocked her mother.

“You talk very fine for a man of your station, but I know gentlemen like you, and I know, without a doubt, that you would not dare give up everything you have. Not for a woman like my daughter. You care nothing for the hearts of those young ladies you use and cast aside. I have met men like you. You will stay away from my Eleanor,” she said with a hiss.

“You have not met men like me, Mrs Hawkins. You may have met men of my station, and you wrongly assume that we are all the same, but I would never hurt your daughter. Whatever it is that makes you believe otherwise, you are wrong.

I am a good man. I am far from perfect, and I regret that I did not show you due respect by asking your approval before I pursued your daughter, but I promise to show you honour in the future if you just give me another chance,” he said, pleading with her.

She would not budge, and Henry didn’t know what to do. How could he speak with Miss Hawkins if he could not get past her mother? How

could he explain himself to the woman he loved if he was stuck out here in the rain? He could feel the drops on the back of his neck, the wind sending little pellets his way.

But Henry wasn't going to give up. Not yet. He would push through, beg and plead. He would do whatever he must until they would listen to him.

"You must leave at once," Mrs Hawkins said.

"I cannot leave. I meant what I said. I will do anything. Tell me what it is you want from me, and I will do it. Anything to be with your daughter," he said.

"The only thing we want from you is for you to leave. You are not welcome here," she said, looking at him with irritation.

Henry was beginning to realise that he was making things worse. Rather than making Mrs Hawkins see that he was a good man, he was proving himself to be willfully stubborn and disagreeable. He was not behaving as a gentleman ought, and he was far from proud of his behaviour.

But he could not simply walk away, could he? He could not let her think that Miss Hawkins meant so little to him that he would give up. He needed her to know—just as he needed Miss Hawkins to know—that he loved her more than life itself.

He yearned to spend his life with her. And if anyone didn't believe him, he would show them just how wrong they were.

“Did you not hear me?” Mrs Hawkins asked, taking an aggressive step forward. She appeared ready to chase after him.

Henry sighed and looked at the bird in his hand. He held Daisy up for Mrs Hawkins to see.

“I do not think I can bring myself to leave, but I shall give you a moment to speak with your daughter. Here is her bird. Will you let her have Daisy and tell her that I have come? Will you speak with her and see if she is willing to talk to me?” he asked, as calmly as possible.

The look in Mrs Hawkins’s eyes softened, and he gathered that she was close to being willing to listen to him. Maybe this sign of his care was at least something to get her attention. And although he didn’t want to have to use an opportunity like this to force her to understand him, he wondered if it would help.

“You brought Daisy?” she asked.

“Of course I did. I would not have left her there. She was upset, missing your daughter. So I brought her. I raced here as quickly as I could, and I know you do not trust me, but I do love your daughter, and I always will. One day, I hope to prove that to you,” he said.

She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders before looking him directly in the eye.

“I am grateful that you brought Daisy, and I hope that you really do care for my daughter, but you will not speak with her this evening. Today is not the day for your attempts to woo her,” she said.

Henry's heart sank. He didn't know what to do. Standing there, defeated, there was only one bright hope that flashed suddenly in the darkness of the moment, a sweet sound and a lilting voice that came from beyond his view.

“Mother? Who is it?”

Chapter 35

Nell came closer, seeing the tension in her mother's and grandmother's shoulders. Curious as to what was happening and why they had been out there by the door for so long, she'd finally decided to come and see what was going on.

Nell could hear that the conversation was serious, but she wondered what was behind it all. And when she heard her mother warning someone away from wooing, Nell had a terrible feeling that something was about to happen without her there—something that very much involved her.

“Mother? Who is it?” she asked, coming up beside her grandmother and peering out the door.

There he was. Standing before her in the open doorway, drenched by the rain, Lord Henry Collins stood magnificent. He was handsome as ever, with his bright green eyes shining in the light of the candle. His dark hair was dripping and his nose, slightly hooked, cast a strange shadow along the doorframe.

But he was there. He had come for her. He had not abandoned her. And that had to mean something. It had to mean that he really did still care for her and that he wanted to have a future with her. He would not have come without intention, would he? Clearly, he cared enough that he had been willing to stand there in the cold and wet, arguing with her mother.

“Lord Collins?” she asked breathlessly.

“Miss Hawkins,” he said with a sigh of relief.

“Collins?” her mother asked in surprise, somewhat taken aback.

Nell glanced at her mother, who still stood between Nell and Lord Collins. Her mother looked away as if lost to some confusion. But soon enough, she looked at Nell again.

“Please, Mother. Will you just let him in? Will you hear him out? I know you do not understand all this, but you must give him a chance. I assure you, he is a good man. His coming here is evidence that he cares enough for me to fight against this lie,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, that same relief in his tone as his shoulders relaxed. “So you know? You know that it was all a lie?”

“I had hoped. Perhaps I am a fool for it, but I do not think it could be possible. You would have told me, would you not?” she asked him.

“I would have. I would never lie to you. But I have no betrothed. I am not engaged. You are the only woman about whom I care. You are the only woman in my heart,” he said.

“Leah ...” her grandmother said to her mother, in the fashion that she so often did. It was clear that Nell’s grandmother was on Nell’s side, wanting to give Lord Collins a chance.

“Please, Mother. Will you let him come in? Will you hear him out?” Nell begged.

She looked at Lord Collins once more, knowing in her heart that this man was the one with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life. She loved him more than she had ever thought possible.

He was everything she had ever dreamt of. He had the gentleness and kindness of heroes in books. He had the attractive face that any woman might dream of. And, most of all, he was devoted and loyal.

Nell knew that he was the only one she could ever love. It didn't matter that she'd never given another man a chance, that she hadn't been afforded the opportunity to even get to know others, aside from Lord Comran. She knew this was the one and only man for her. She didn't need to meet others to know they could not possibly compare.

“Please, Mother?” Nell asked again.

With that, her mother turned to her and gave a single nod before she moved out of the way and let Lord Collins into the house.

He immediately drew near to Nell, taking her hands in his. It was a bold move for a man to make in front of a woman's family, but Nell understood the desperation. She remembered her dream and the moment when he had taken her hand.

It had been powerful and lovely in the dream, but it was nothing like this moment in reality, when he was so close that she could smell the rain and earth and cinnamon that wafted from him.

There, in the dim glow of candles, with Lord Collins dripping on the rug at the entrance to the small house, Nell thought she could commit to being his forever. She would have in an instant if only he asked.

But he refrained. Rather than draw closer to Nell, he let go of her hands and took a step back, respectfully. He turned back to Nell's mother and started to explain.

"I assure you that I have no intended bride. I do believe that I know who wrote the letter, but I cannot be positive until I confront him," he said.

"And who might that have been?" Nell's mother asked.

"My father," Lord Collins replied. "I think that he may have been the one who tried to keep us apart because he does not want me marrying someone of a different station. I, however, care nothing about such things. I would gladly give up everything if you please. I know that you are not fond of men like me."

Nell's mother winced, and her expression faltered.

"You say that you are Lord Collins?" she asked, looking closely at his face.

Lord Collins appeared confused by her inspection, and he grew uncomfortable. Even in the dim glow of the candles, Nell could see him blush with embarrassment as she examined him. Nell couldn't be

sure what her mother was doing or why she was suddenly acting so peculiar.

“Yes, Mrs Hawkins. Were you not aware?” he asked.

“My mother has not wanted to hear a word about you, and she did not even know your name,” Nell explained. “But that is beside the point for now. My hope is that you will explain to them that you have no improper intentions for me. I trust you, Lord Collins.

My only wish is that my mother and grandmother will come to feel the same. I hope they will begin to realise that you are every bit the man I say you are and that their other concerns are not relevant.”

Nell stood there, full of hope and wonder. She could hardly believe that Lord Collins had come all this way for her. She didn't even know how he had found her. And more than anything, she wondered what had inspired him to come. But just then, Daisy flew from her mother's hand over to Nell.

Nell gasped, and Lord Collins grinned.

“I had to bring her here for you,” he said.

“Oh, you are so wonderful! I can hardly believe it! I am so thankful,” she exclaimed.

“It was the least I could do. When I came, I knew that you would want

to see her. She was chirping madly at your house, clearly upset that you were not there. She trusted me enough to come with me and stayed in my hand the entire journey, even as we raced here through the rain,” he said.

Nell tried not to swoon. She was so overcome by the romance of it all that she could have simply collapsed into his arms and begged him to propose. But she knew that she needed her mother to listen to him first.

If she could not get her mother to give him a chance, all of this was futile, and she would feel like such a fool for handing her heart over without the fortune of being allowed to take his in turn.

“That was very kind of you,” Nell said.

“It was, indeed,” her mother said, sighing.

“Leah, should we invite Lord Collins into the parlour and allow him to make his case?” Nell’s grandmother asked, giving her mother a nudge.

“Yes, I suppose,” her mother replied rather tersely.

“Very well, give me just a moment, and I shall bring the tea,” her grandmother said.

Nell was thrilled and relieved that, at last, there was hope. Her mother was going to give Lord Collins a chance, and it meant that Nell might actually have the option of spending her life with him.

If she could help matters along, if she could help convince her mother that all would be well, perhaps things really would come together. Perhaps they could all be content with the final decision, and everything would be precisely as it ought to be.

Nell's mother quietly led them to the parlour while her grandmother went for the tea. Nell couldn't believe that all this was finally happening. She sat near Lord Collins while her mother lit a couple more candles and then came to sit as well.

She would not make eye contact with Lord Collins and seemed extremely uncomfortable, not at all like the fearsome woman she had been moments before.

"How did you find me?" Nell asked as Daisy hopped up on her shoulder.

"Mary, Lord Comran and I all went to your home in search of a sign. Mary was very worried about you. We found the letters claiming to be from my intended, and I was furious. We then found a draft of the letter to your grandmother saying you were coming here. With Mary's help, we decided to come. They are both in the coach outside but urged me to speak with you on my own first," he said.

Nell smiled, glad to hear that Mary had helped him find her and that Mary and Lord Comran were both there as well. She knew it would help matters if things became difficult again. The two of them might be able to help convince her mother that Lord Collins truly was a good man.

“We got here as quickly as we were able, but the weather slowed us down a bit. I feared that you would already be asleep by the time we arrived. It was a shock that you were all still awake,” he said.

“I was reading in the library, and my mother and grandmother were in here, sewing. A few minutes later and I would have retired to my room. You got here just in time,” Nell said with a smile.

“I am glad for it. I could not have forgiven myself if I had missed my chance with you this evening,” he said.

“That is all very pretty poetry, but you still have much to explain to me,” Nell’s mother interjected.

Just then, her grandmother arrived once more, this time with tea.

“Leah, please be nice to the boy. He is here because he loves your daughter. You had best give him a chance to explain without your demands for it,” her grandmother urged.

Nell’s mother chewed the inside of her lip and looked both annoyed and worried. Something new about Lord Collins was bothering her, and it was not the previous concern. Whatever she had just discovered about him, it was obvious to everyone in the room that Nell’s mother was even more uncomfortable and that she would be slower than ever to trust him.

“Mother, do you have questions?” Nell asked again, prompting her mother to speak. She knew that the sooner they dealt with the uncertainties, the sooner their happiness could move forward.

“Yes, I do. Lord Collins, are you an earl?” she began.

“Not yet, Mrs Hawkins. My father is an earl. But as I said, I am happy to give up my title, and all that comes with it. I know that you have no fondness for noblemen and, if you wish, I will let it all go,” he said.

Before anything more could be said, Lord Collins continued in his impassioned speech.

“I have very few skills outside of a mind for business. If I am not an earl and I do not stake my claim upon my inheritance, it means that I will have to use my business acumen in other ways.

It will be difficult at first, but I assure you that I will provide for your daughter and take excellent care of her. I will work hard and do whatever I must to ensure that she is well looked after,” he vowed.

“Yes, well, that is very kind of you, but it was not my question,” her mother said, rather coldly.

“I see,” Lord Collins replied, disheartened. “I apologise for my misunderstanding.”

“What I mean to say is that a man is only as good as the reputation of his family. And if you do not come from a family known for honesty and good intentions, it is very difficult to believe that you would be honest and well-intentioned. Do you understand?” her mother asked.

Lord Collins flashed a worried expression to Nell. She couldn't comprehend her mother's meaning. Why did she think poorly of Lord Collins and his family? She knew nothing about them. She knew nothing of nobility at all, priding herself on how firmly she stayed away from them. There was no reason for this particular judgement or disdain.

"I understand what you have said, but I am not sure exactly how it affects your thoughts regarding me," Lord Collins admitted. He seemed worried, and it made Nell's heart race.

She didn't want him to be upset or to feel unwelcome there, but it was clear that her mother didn't care for his family. Much to Nell's chagrin, she had a terrible feeling there was more to it than her mother's prejudice against nobility.

Against her better judgement, Nell reached out and took his hand. She didn't like the way her mother was treating him. It didn't seem fair in the least, and she just wanted Lord Collins to know that he was welcome, that he was wanted. Whatever had caused her mother to be so abrasive, there was no reason for it.

"Lord Collins, is your father the Earl of Rosewell?" Nell's mother asked.

Lord Collins sat straighter and looked at Nell's mother with curiosity. Nell realised that perhaps she really did dislike his family. Maybe she knew how strongly Lord Rosewell opposed the idea of his son pursuing a woman outside of nobility, and her mother was offended by it.

“Y—”

Lord Collins was cut off by the sound of a loud banging at the door. Someone had just arrived. And whoever it was, they were not happy to be there.

Chapter 36

“Goodness me, whoever could be coming right now?” asked Miss Hawkins’s grandmother.

“Is that Lord Comran or Mary?” Miss Hawkins asked.

“It does not sound like them. It sounds like someone who is angry,” Henry said, swallowing the fear that he knew who it might be.

Miss Hawkins’s grandmother got up and went to the door. For a moment, there was an angry discourse, but Henry couldn’t hear it clearly. And soon thereafter, they heard footsteps coming back down the hall.

The worst thing Henry feared in that moment had come to pass. His father to burst through the door, his fierce presence filling the frame and his eyes aflame with rage. Henry knew the anger that lay beneath this anger, he knew that it was because of Henry’s disobedience, because of his love for a woman of a different station, because he was not the son that his father had always wanted.

“Father ...” he said.

“Henry, you shame me at every turn! What do you think you are doing here? You have the audacity to come after this woman? Did I not warn you? Did I not tell you that you would lose everything if you continued with this nonsense? You are a fool!” his father shouted, staring him down.

But Henry stood to his full height and straightened his back and shoulders. He was not going to back down.

“Father, you should not have come here. You should not think you can stop me,” Henry declared.

“You selfish child! You want to give up on everything I have done for you? I have worked hard to ensure that you have everything you could ever want or need. And this is how you repay me? You come here, chasing after this ... this ... this wild little woman who could never be accepted in society?” he demanded to know.

“Do not speak of her with such flippancy, Father. She means everything to me. More than any grand gift of society. She means the world to me. I would not give her up for anything, no matter how you try to force me to let her go,” he said.

Miss Hawkins seemed to cower, shrinking back against her chair. Henry understood. He knew that she was not a fearful woman, but she was also not accustomed to displays like this. She had scarcely been around men, much less having to endure a dispute such as this one. He felt awful that she should have to see it.

“Why have you disobeyed me thusly? Why have you not listened? I will drag you away from here if I must. I will not allow you to give up on everything that you have at your disposal. I will not let you ruin the reputation of our family over something as utterly ridiculous as a woman who could never bring you pride,” his father shouted.

But Henry had already made his decision. He would not be bullied by his father or let him stop Henry from pursuing the woman he loved. No longer would anyone make decisions for him based on nonsensical rules set forth by society.

“Father, you know nothing of this woman whom I love. You have been cruel and unjustified in your insistence. You do not realise that she is the purest and loveliest woman I have ever known. I will spend my life with her, with or without your approval.

I love her, and nothing you say is going to change that. I will never allow you to come between us. She is the woman I am going to marry, no matter the cost,” he declared.

“I hope you mean that, boy,” his father said, taking Henry by the collar and bringing his face close. “You just might come to see how costly it is, and you will most assuredly regret it.”

“Get out of here!” Miss Hawkins’s grandmother shouted, swatting his father until he let go of Henry’s collar. “Get out of my home! You are not welcome here, and you unhand your son at once, or I shall call for the constable!”

“Who do you think you are? I am Lord Rosewell. The constable would never listen to you when I am present,” his father insisted.

“Oh, shame on you!” the elder woman tutted. “You are such a foolish, prideful man. You keep away from your son if you are going to behave that way. Now, leave my home at once. I read the society pages, Lord Rosewell. I know how to send gossip to them.

And if I must send word that you came here and accosted an old woman in an effort to pull your son away from a woman you deem unfit for marriage, who do you think will bear the brunt of

judgement?”

The threat sent a jolt through the room, and Henry couldn't help grinning at the tiny, white-haired woman who stood looking up at his father with a fierce eye for protection.

“You threaten me with public humiliation?” his father asked. “Henry, do you not see who these women are? They live alone in a cottage in the forest. They have clearly put a spell upon you. They must be evil of some sort to trick you into falling for this young woman! It is madness!”

Henry could not believe that his father would make such an accusation, but all went silent when, suddenly and calmly, Mrs Hawkins stood and stepped forward. For the first time, she commanded his father's attention, and when he looked at her, his jaw slackened. He was clearly in shock.

Mrs Hawkins remained still, letting him simply take in the sight of her. All remained quiet for a moment, a strange moment. Henry saw recognition in both their eyes, and he wondered what could be behind this. But as he watched them, he saw something else behind his father's eyes. A true and genuine emotion, the likes of which he had never shown before.

“Leah ...”

The name was whispered with such a quiet gentleness that Henry almost didn't hear it. He couldn't believe that his father knew Miss Hawkins's mother. Miss Hawkins was evidently surprised as well. And Henry realised that this must have been the reason her mother had got so strange after hearing his name.

"I could not believe it when I learned that he was your son," she said.

"But you ... and your daughter ...?" his father asked.

"Strange how fate takes us through these twists and turns," Mrs Hawkins said, folding her hands and standing with angelic poise.

"Mother?" Miss Hawkins asked, clearly wanting the explanation for which they were all waiting.

"Eleanor, darling, this is Lord Rosewell. He is the man who broke my heart," Mrs Hawkins said.

Miss Hawkins turned to Henry's father with eyes wide in horror. Henry couldn't believe what he'd just heard. His own father was the one who had made Mrs Hawkins hate nobility? His own father was the reason she had been determined to keep her daughter safe and protected from men like them for all her life?

"Father?" Henry asked, stunned as everyone else in the room.

"Leah ... I have thought of you nearly every day since the last time I saw you," his father said.

"I find that very difficult to believe. As it was, you ran from me with all your might," she replied bitterly.

“No, that is not what happened. Oh, how I wish I could explain it all to you!” he said with great sadness.

“Well, now is your chance. You tell my daughter why you hurt her, or you get out of my house,” Miss Hawkins’s grandmother demanded.

Henry’s father let out a ragged sigh, clearly burdened by whatever had happened. He hung his head and then looked up again with great effort.

“My father told me that I could not be with you. I begged him, over and over again. But he told me that if I allowed myself to fall in love with a woman who was not noble, I would lose everything. He said that our family would be ruined.

I did not want to give you up, but they insisted. At last, I gave in to the expectations of society. I chose propriety over my love for you,” he confessed in a display of vulnerability that Henry had never imagined.

Mrs Hawkins’s eyes misted over, but she looked away. Henry could see that she was not entirely convinced. It was clear to him that she was a very difficult woman to explain things to. She was not quick to give anyone a chance. But Henry hoped that, in an unusual display of character, his father would do the right thing.

“I deeply regret what happened. I allowed my mother and father to dissuade me from what I wanted. And when I told them how difficult it would be for you to accept, they told me that I had to be as cold and callous as I could. My mother said that the only way for a woman to get over a broken heart was to hate the man who broke it.

She said that I must be cruel to you because it was the way to help you get over the loss of our love. So I did as she commanded. I listened to them even when it was difficult. I regret it now; I truly do. I loved you, and I never wanted to lose you,” he said.

“Then why are you forcing your son into the same circumstance?” she asked in anger. “If you truly regret it, if you want to go back and undo it, why are you forcing him to make the same decision?”

Henry was relieved that she had placed that challenge before his father. He knew that his father had ignored his pleas, and Henry didn’t think his father would budge, even if Henry begged. But to hear this from Mrs Hawkins, Henry hoped his father would be willing to listen, that he would be willing to hear her out and make the right choice.

“It is not so easy as you may think ...” his father said.

Mrs Hawkins scoffed and shook her head angrily.

“Not so easy? You truly think that I am going to feel sorry for your plight? With everything you put me through, you ought to be ashamed that you would insist that your son do the same to my daughter. Life is not so simple for us as it is for men like you, but that does not mean that we are any less important or have any less value or worth.

I am astonished that you would behave as though my daughter is unworthy of your son and then claim that you feel bad for having let me go,” she said, bitter tears streaking down her cheeks.

“I spent my life being forced into a box, Leah!” his father shouted. “I was told daily what a fool I had been for trying to build a life with you. I was scolded and torn down, reminded what a shame I was to my family. So, yes, I found it difficult when my own son wanted the same thing I did.”

“And you decided to hurt him as your mother and father hurt you?” she challenged him.

“I was jealous!” he spat.

Henry was shocked. He had never imagined that his own father would be jealous of him. Even less that his father would confess to it, that he would admit his inability to accept that Henry should have the life he lost out on.

“If you are so jealous of your son’s chance at happiness, you are the selfish fool. You should never have let your own hard heart get in the way of him,” she said.

And with those words, Mrs Hawkins looked down in shame of her own. She then looked up at her daughter, those tears still spilling from her eyes.

“I am so sorry, Eleanor,” she said in a hushed tone.

“I know, Mother,” Miss Hawkins replied, her chin quivering and eyes misting over. Without another word, Miss Hawkins reached for her mother and embraced her. The two seemed to make peace without the need for words.

Mrs Hawkins clearly understood her own failure, her own selfishness. It was obvious that she finally accepted that she had forced her opinions on her daughter, separating her from Henry all because of what she had been through. And as Henry looked back to his father, he sensed a change had come over him as well.

His father cleared his throat, and he struggled to make eye contact with Henry.

“I know that you must be terribly disappointed to have me as a father. I know that I have failed you, time and time again. I am undeserving of a son like you. I let you believe that I was disappointed in you when, really, I was angry that you might have a chance at the life I gave up. You had a chance at love when I allowed love to be taken from me,” he said.

“But you have the chance now to make things right,” Henry said.

“It will not be easy, you know,” his father said.

“I know. But I care nothing for the easy path. And if you strip me of my title and inheritance, I will accept it. Just as I will give it up of my own accord if Mrs Hawkins demands it,” he said.

“I will not take it from you,” his father said, giving him a nod of promise.

Mrs Hawkins looked up at him and sniffed away her tears, shaking her

head.

“Nor will I demand you reject it,” she said.

“I truly am sorry for all that I put you through, Leah,” Henry’s father said, clearly determined to make things right.

“I know, Marcus. And we will make all this right through the union of our children. Whatever sadness came through our separation, at least we were both given the chance to have children we love. And now, they will get to have what we never could,” Mrs Hawkins said.

“Do you mean ...?” Henry asked.

“Mother?” Miss Hawkins echoed.

“Yes, darling,” Mrs Hawkins replied. “If you wish to marry him, I will choose to support you. No matter what.”

“Oh, Mother!” she exclaimed, embracing her mother once more.

“And Father? You consent to allow this as well?” Henry asked in disbelief.

“Yes, Henry. I consent. If you will treat her well, and if you will have the integrity that I never displayed, I heartily give you my approval to

marry this woman you love. You must care for her always, all the days of your life. I trust that you will do so, for you are a better man than I ever was," he said.

Henry could hardly believe it. He had hoped for so many things, but this had been the last thing he ever expected. Through all the joy and the pain, he didn't think it was possible that his father would ever allow this.

He only imagined that he would be able to marry her once he gave it all up, once he let go of everything that society knew and expected from him. It would be difficult, of course, but that didn't matter.

Henry was more than willing to go through the challenges. He would teach Miss Hawkins to handle society and all the drama that came with it. But he believed they could get through it all with ease because now, at last, they were together.

Chapter 37

Nell couldn't believe all that was happening. She was overcome by her joy and didn't know how to express it. But then, when she turned to Henry, he dropped to one knee, and she knew that her happiness had not yet reached its fullness—but it soon would.

“Eleanor Hawkins,” he began, “I am terribly sorry that I have no ring. I did not know that all this would happen when I came to your home this morning in the hopes of seeing you. But now, I know that I cannot walk away from here without asking you to be my wife.”

He took Nell's hand in his own as he waited for her answer. With her throat tight from the tears she was holding back, Nell nodded eagerly.

“Yes,” she finally said. “Yes, with all my heart!”

Henry scooped her in his arms and spun her in a circle. She laughed and rested against him, full of joy. It was the most wonderful day in all her life, and she wanted nothing more than to stay there with him, indulging in the beauty of the moment.

But Henry pulled away from her. The smile on his face did not falter, but he turned to his father with a question.

“Our friends are still waiting in the coach. Could you please go to them? Could you have them join us? I feel awful that they were not here when I proposed, but I should feel much worse if they are stuck out there any longer,” he said with a laugh.

“Oh, goodness!” Nell exclaimed, feeling awful that Lord Comran and Mary were still outside.

Lord Rosewell rushed out to get them, and Nell’s grandmother went to fetch more tea. As soon as Mary and Lord Comran entered with Lord Rosewell once more, Nell’s mother pulled her aside as Henry shared the wondrous news.

“I am very happy for you, darling,” her mother said.

“Thank you, Mother. I know that it was difficult for you. I am sorry for everything I put you through,” Nell said.

“You have nothing for which to apologise. It was my fault for being so stubborn. I was stuck in my own grief,” she said.

“But now, you may let go of it,” Nell said.

“Indeed, I may. After all these years, I can have peace. While I would never care for him in that way again, it is a great relief to know that I may let go of what he did, and we can be happy for our children without having to live with the bitterness against one another,” she said.

“I am so happy that you feel that way, Mother. I hope that you and Lord Rosewell will learn to be friends in time,” Nell said.

Her mother gave a playful cringe.

“I do not know if we will ever be friends, my dear, but we may be cordial to one another, and that is enough, in my mind. I hope that he will feel the same. Now, there is no need to keep chattering on with me. Go and enjoy time with your friends and your intended.

You have a wonderful life ahead, Eleanor. Good things will come your way through this union. I am delighted for you, and I know that all the joys you have hoped for are going to come to pass,” her mother said.

Nell truly believed it. She made her way over to Mary so they could celebrate, and Mary threw her arms around Nell.

“Oh, I knew that it would all come to pass! You are finally living the joyous life that I always hoped you would. I am so happy for you, Nell. You deserve this. You deserve every good thing that has come. I hope that you and Lord Collins enjoy every moment you have with one another. It is going to be a most beautiful wedding, I am sure. Oh! And you must teach others how to play your instruments so that you can have your compositions played at the wedding,” Mary exclaimed.

Nell laughed and shook her head.

“While we have not discussed the time in which we will be married, I strongly doubt there will be time to teach anyone how to play them. But I do not mind so much. We will be perfectly all right, even if there is no music at all,” Nell said, remembering her dream when she sat down the instrument and the music played on.

She believed that it would always be that way. There was no need for instruments when the music of life would always surround her. And there was no more beautiful song than the one that played every time

she was with Henry.

That was the harmony in her life. The two of them walking side by side as two distinct people who came together as one, lovely sound. They complemented each other in a way that she had never imagined. Although there were still a great many questions for the future, Nell didn't think any of them would be so difficult to answer now. She would struggle to get on in society, of course, but that didn't frighten her so much anymore.

All she wanted was the chance to enjoy her life with Henry. The rest was simply a matter of accepting what would happen and moving along.

"Ahem. Forgive me for interrupting the occasion," Lord Comran said, loudly getting everyone's attention.

"Yes, young man? Have you something to say?" Nell's grandmother asked in her devilishly sweet way.

"Indeed, madam, I do. I first wish to say an overwhelming congratulations to my dearest friend in all the world. Henry, you always deserved the best of love, and now it is yours. I could not be happier for you than I am at this very moment.

I wish you well. I wish you joy. And I wish you a long life together as you indulge in the remarkable music of your wife and teach her how to survive the fangs of London," he said, eliciting laughs from those in the room.

“But that is not all. As we missed the first proposal of the evening, I thought you all might not mind if another ensues.”

Nell clasped her hands together in delight as Lord Comran turned to Mary. He took her hands in his and leaned his forehead against hers.

“Mary, my dear, we have not known one another long. But I have fallen in love with you in a way I never expected. If you, too, are willing to battle the society pages, and if you are willing to stand firm against the women who claim that you do not belong, I should very much like to be the man by your side, fighting those battles with you and then coming home to the relief of the life we build together,” he said.

As Lord Comran spoke, Henry came over to Nell, and she smiled up at him as he took her hand. It was such a relief to have him in her life at last. And when Lord Comran finally asked Mary if she would be his wife, Nell could barely hear Mary’s answer above the din of cheers that rose up in the room.

“Alas! We must celebrate the engagements of not one but two young couples!” Nell’s grandmother said in exasperation. “I wish I had been warned earlier so that I might have made a cake.”

“Grandmother, let me help you in the kitchen,” Nell said with a laugh.

“And I, as well,” Mary added.

Nell’s mother joined them, and the four women made their way to bake together, chatting away about planning the weddings and all the

excitement that came along with it. Nell wondered what the men were discussing, but she knew that it was really none of her business just yet.

For now, she could be in the company of her newly engaged friend and her grandmother and even Daisy, who sat at the windowsill, eating seeds that Nell's grandmother put out for her.

But best of all, Nell could celebrate with her mother. At last, they understood one another. At last, Nell's mother realised the most important thing she could give her daughter was no longer protection, but freedom. At some point, the switch had to be made, and now was the time. At last, Nell could live her life as she hoped.

And she would live it with love.

Epilogue

Nell opened her eyes, smiling to herself. She'd had the dream again. Night after night, she saw it. She saw herself in that garden with Henry. Her music played around them, and they were together in the centre of it, with the orchard trees and the rose bushes and the lavender.

She'd told Henry about the dream just days after their engagement, and he had laughed, admitting to having had a flash of the very same. But he had not had the dream again since, and Nell considered it her own, wonderful dream to which she could aspire. Henry had promised her that he would make space in the gardens of their home for her to recreate it.

They would make the dream real. It would come to life, just as Nell longed for.

She got up out of bed and stretched, eager to start the day. It was going to be a bright, wonderful day. Full of hope. Full of excitement. Full of every good thing.

Nell went over to her vanity. The day before, Henry had given her a sprig of lavender because of her dream. She rubbed the flowers against her wrists and her neck, enjoying the scent they covered her in and the fact that she would always remember that on her wedding day, she smelled of lavender.

And every time she walked by lavender for years to come, she would have a spark of the memory of her wedding.

Nell still couldn't believe it was real. In the two months since the engagement, she had often questioned whether it had really happened. Was she really this fortunate? Had she really been given the chance to spend her life with the man she loved more than

anything else?

As she started brushing her hair, Nell smiled to herself. Indeed, she really had been given the chance. She was going to spend her life with him, and no one could get in the way of that now.

Nell fumed when she heard the knock on her door. She had been so lost to her thoughts that she hadn't even heard the footsteps in the hall as she normally did.

"Yes?" she called.

With that, the door opened, and her mother came into the room with a proud smile on her face.

"Oh, darling, you are barely awake, and you already look like a bride," she said.

Nell laughed and looked at herself in the vanity mirror, thinking she very much did not look like a bride. Her hair was a mess to be brushed through, and she still appeared riled with sleep in her gaze, but she didn't care anymore. She knew that she would be ready in time to leave, and that was all that mattered.

"Do you need help with anything?" her mother asked, setting tea down before her.

"Do you have a moment to help with my hair?" Nell asked.

“Of course, my dear,” her mother replied.

Nell had never been the best at doing her hair, and she was relieved to have help from her mother, who was far more skilled with it.

“I have been practicing, you know,” her mother said as she got to work.

Nell was suddenly nervous, not sure if she really wanted to hear how her mother was coming along with the Belute. She had begged Nell to teach her how to play a song so that she could perform it at the luncheon after the wedding. It had been rather ... difficult for her mother from the beginning. But Nell wanted to encourage her mother with music and had agreed to let her play the tune.

“I am glad, Mother. You still wish to play it at the wedding?” Nell asked.

“If you do not mind,” her mother replied.

Nell smiled at her in the mirror, resigned that she wanted her mother to play it no matter how good or bad she may be.

Before long, Nell’s hair was finished, and she was dressed in the simple but elegant gown with a creamy silk fabric that cascaded with pale rose embroidery. She and her mother made their way down the stairs to where Nell’s grandmother sat with Mary at the table set for breakfast.

“Oh, what if I spill something?” Nell asked. “We should have eaten before I put on the dress.”

“Here, darling,” her mother said, putting a sheet around Nell. It made Nell laugh, but she could indulge in the bread and butter toast, the breakfast potatoes, and the boiled eggs. She didn’t have to worry about anything staining her dress, and she could enjoy the time with her mother, grandmother, and friend.

“You look beautiful, Nell,” Mary said.

“As beautiful as you did?” Nell asked.

Mary had got married just three weeks before, having rushed her wedding as quickly as possible. Nell had been thrilled to see how happy Mary and Lord Comran were. She knew that, after today, she would be just as overjoyed.

“I think every bride is as lovely as another on her wedding day,” Nell’s mother said, answering the question.

“Agreed,” her grandmother added, opening the door to air out the smell that remained from the cooking.

With the door open, Daisy flew straight inside the cottage and landed on the sheet that covered Nell.

“Oh, goodness! Hello, little one. Are you coming to my wedding today?” Nell asked.

The sparrow chirped but immediately flew away, back outside. Nell knew that Daisy wouldn't be leaving the house for long that day. She had a nest full of chirping little beasts devoid of feathers and whose eyes were barely opening yet.

Daisy would be busy finding worms for her babies, and Nell imagined that, soon enough, she would be trying to feed babies of her own.

It was amazing to think of the changes that had taken place in her life over the past few months, but she would not change them for all the world.

"Are you finished, Nell? We need to leave soon," her mother said.

"Yes, Mother. I am ready," she replied eagerly. Nell couldn't wait to go to the church. She was finally going to marry Henry!

They soon made their way to the church, and Nell was eager to get there. By the time they arrived, she could barely contain herself.

She stood outside the door with Mary, her mother, and her grandmother all at her side. Waiting until just the right moment, Nell tried to stay calm until, at last, the door opened, and she began to walk through.

For a moment, the change of light, from the brightness outside to the dimmer light inside, made it difficult for her to take in everything before her. But after only a moment, her eyes adjusted, and she saw him standing at the altar, down at the end of the aisle.

Henry Collins was not just a future earl or some nobleman. He was the man she loved, and he was now going to be her husband. She couldn't believe her fortune, but she knew that it was hers regardless.

Henry's smile beamed, and Nell couldn't stop the tears of joy from filling her eyes. This man before her was the greatest thing that had ever happened to her. She couldn't believe that he had chosen her, but she realised that she needed to stop living in disbelief.

Every day for months, she had told herself she couldn't believe this or that good thing.

But it was here, right before her. It was time for her to start believing in it.

When Nell reached him, Henry took her by the hand. The minister nodded at them that he was ready to begin, and Nell bit her lip with excitement as the ceremony started.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together today to witness the union of Lord Henry William Collins and Miss Eleanor Anne Hawkins. As we gather in celebration of these two people, we remember that love is a sacred commitment, a vow of forever.

We remember that two cannot be divided by class or status, expectation, or society. When these two make this vow of marriage today, they promise to spend the rest of their lives together, no matter the cost," the minister said.

Nell agreed wholeheartedly. She had made this vow long before entering the church, but she was happy to publicly declare it now. When she glanced over to Lord Rosewell, she knew that he would never stand in their way again. He supported them, even. He was happy for them.

It was unthinkable, but he had made the choice. And while there were still those in society who did not understand, and Nell's name had even found its way to the society pages as being the pauper to snatch up a nobleman, she did not care.

She was happy, and this man standing before her was happy. Together, they would fight against the expectations of society. They would let their love reign over their fears.

The minister continued in the ceremony until he reached the moment Nell had been waiting for.

"Lord Collins, do you take Miss Hawkins to be your wife? Do you promise to love, honour, and cherish her forever, through good times and bad?" the minister asked.

"I do, with all my heart," Henry promised.

"And do you, Miss Hawkins, take Lord Collins to be your husband? Do you promise to love, honour, and cherish him forever? Through good times and the bad?" he asked, echoing the question to Nell.

"I do," she replied. "With all my heart."

"With these vows made and with these rings upon your fingers, I pronounce you man and wife!"

Their friends and family erupted in cheers, although they had agreed

to keep the guests to only a few at the wedding. Nell knew that the reception lunch would be far grander and with a good deal more people. She kept her hand in Henry's as he ran with her from the church and to the coach. They climbed in, and Henry pulled Nell close to him.

"My darling, we are finally married! At last!" he exclaimed.

Nell giggled at that.

"At last? We have only known one another for four months," she reminded him.

"Very well, I suppose you are right. But it seems like it has been so much longer. It seems that we have gone through every possible ordeal in our short time together," he said.

"I know," she conceded. "And I know what you mean when you say, 'at last.' It really does feel like forever. I do not think I could have waited another moment to be your wife."

"Nor I. I have wanted to be your husband since the first day that I met you, when I heard your music playing through the trees, and I wondered where such a haunting sound could be coming from. I am overjoyed that I was lost that day. Because it was you who found me," he said.

Nell looked up at Henry, and he looked down in return. He leaned his head forward, so their foreheads rested together in a sweet, loving moment. Nell wanted to kiss him, but she tried to be patient and let

Henry take the lead in that glorious moment.

They soon reached the reception hall, and the coachman opened the door, letting them out to where all their guests awaited them. Nell had to let go of Henry's hand so she could greet everyone, giving hugs as needed and thanking their friends for having come to the wedding.

She had met so many people in Henry's life, and it was still strange to her to be thrust into such a crowd, but Nell had handled it well.

A part of her had been terribly frightened by the idea of suddenly being a member of society. She worried that the women would all mock her and be cruel. Thankfully, most of the women Henry knew were decent, all married to friends of his. They had been kind and accepted Nell and Mary alike, despite their lack of titles.

Henry had insisted on keeping the reception to no more than fifty people because he knew that it was still strange for Nell, but she was beginning to like having so many friends and was starting to think that life really was better this way.

After greeting everyone, Nell and Henry were led to a table assigned to the two of them. There, they sat, and Nell's mother stood with the Belute in her hands. All eyes were upon her, and Nell was terribly nervous. Her hands were shaking, both in fear that no one would like the instrument and also worried for her mother, who was still new to playing it.

But, much to Nell's surprise, the sound that came from her mother's playing was smooth and lovely. It was the song Nell had wanted to be performed, a song she had written for Henry the day after he proposed to her. It was a song of response to his love for her, of confessing her own. It did not have the mournful quality of so many she had written

before but rather held only joy.

Nell looked around the room and saw there were misty eyes of emotion as well as eyes wide with wonder upon hearing this unique sound. She couldn't help feeling a surge of pride that her mother played so beautifully and also that people genuinely seemed intrigued by the instrument.

"You see?" Henry asked.

"See what?"

"How they all respond to what you have made? I think it is a sign, my dear. Whatever the future holds for me at my father's business, there is another work that I must do," Henry said.

"Exactly what do you mean by that?" Nell asked him nervously.

"I think we need to start a business for your instruments. Aside from my father's. I don't want you to be a side to his furniture. I want your products to dazzle the people of England as they are dazzling those in this room," he said.

"And you really think it would be worth the investment? Trying to sell a great many of them?" she asked with hesitation.

"I am sure of it. And we will get it into their hands with ease. You are going to impress a great many people, my sweet Nell. You already

have, but this is only just the beginning,” he said.

She smiled in wonder and, as her mother held the final note, the guests cheered for a second time that day. Nell realised that maybe her husband was right. Maybe she really could find a way to succeed with her instruments.

After all, they were the reason she had found Henry to begin with, were they not? He would never have approached her at the house had he not heard her playing the music.

She was determined that they would find a way to make it happen, but for now, she just wanted to enjoy this first day as the wife of the man she loved.

After a lovely cake and more time to greet their friends, Henry asked Nell if she was ready to leave.

“Indeed, I am. I am rather tired, and I just want to be alone. I want to be with my husband,” she said, eager to be close to Henry and not have to keep distracting herself with the other people around them.

They said their farewells and then got into the coach to go to their new home. Henry had just purchased it the month before, and Nell was delighted by its quaint beauty.

The house was similar to a cottage and surrounded by an orchard, but it was a much larger home than the one she had grown up in. There was space for a library—and not like the cramped library her grandmother had forced into a house where it didn’t fit.

There was a grand study for Henry to do business. And there was a workspace for Nell, where she would make her instruments and expand her capacity for making them. She would have every tool at her disposal now, and it meant she could make newer, fancier things than ever before.

“We are here,” Henry said, helping Nell out of the coach. When they were just before the door, he scooped her up and carried her in his arms over the threshold and into the house. The maid greeted them, and the footmen took their things.

They made their way up the stairs to have tea on their room’s balcony, overlooking the orchard and the little bare spot where Nell was going to plant rose bushes and lavender.

“What do you think, my dear? Do you like our home?” Henry asked.

“It is the loveliest place I have ever been. I hope you will be happy here as well,” Nell replied.

“So long as you are here with me, I could not be happier,” he said.

Henry took Nell’s hand, and she gave it willingly. He then turned to her and brought his chair closer to hers. Nell turned to her husband and, with trust in her heart, she closed her eyes. A moment later, she felt his lips upon hers. All around them, the earth began to sing.

THE END

*Can't get enough of Nell and Henry? Then make sure to check out the
[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

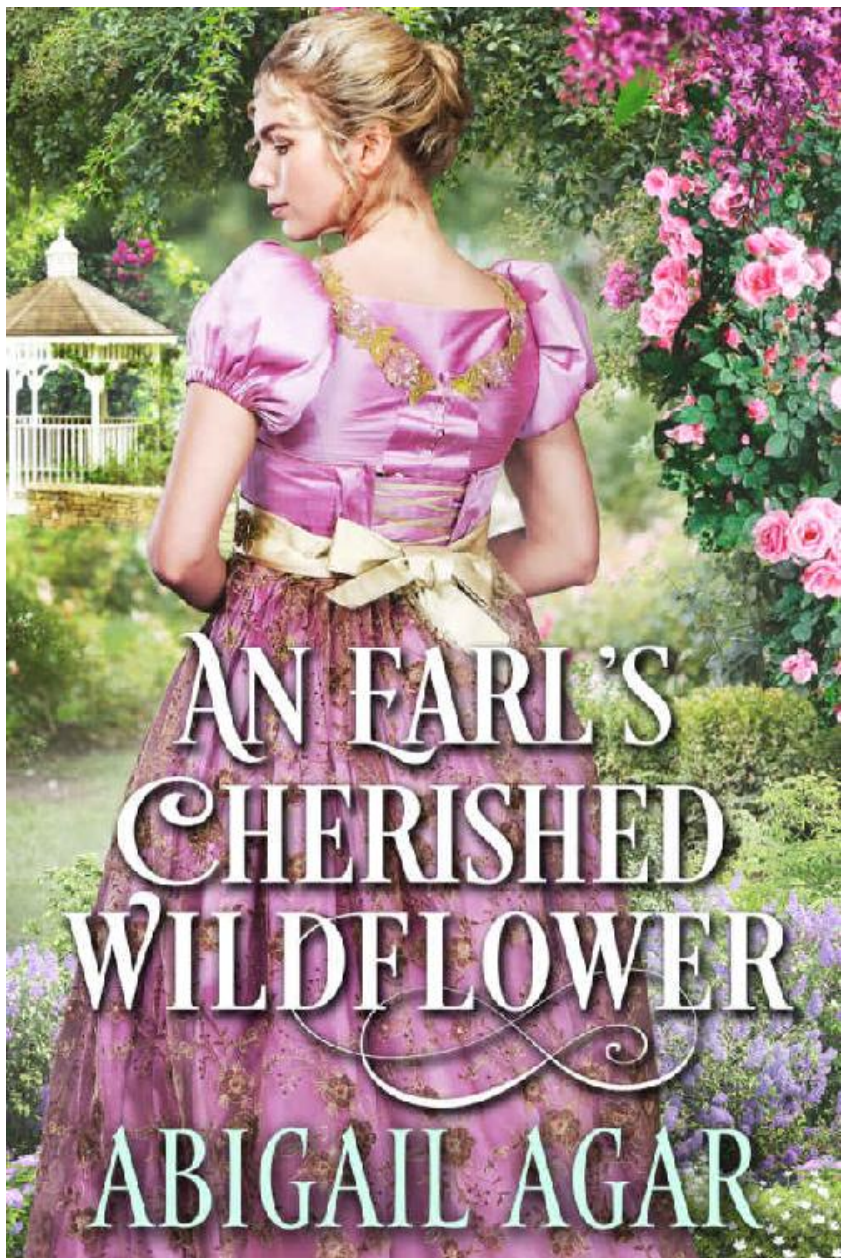
*What will Henry's surprise to Nell be and what kind of unexpected news
will make her heart sing with joy?*

What kind of secret will Nell keep from Henry?

Why will Nell feel worried about her mother?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
<http://abigailagar.com/nell>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**An Earl's Cherished Wildflower**”, my Amazon Best-
Selling novel!)*



An Earl's Cherished Wildflower

Introduction

Turning from a little tomboy to the most desirable debutante, Charlotte Clarke's life faces the most unexpected challenge. Even though Charlotte's upbringing with her brothers has fashioned her for an adventurous life, her success as a proper lady will thrust her into the ton's glamorous but dangerous world...

Will an unfulfilled love from the past manage to save Charlotte before it is too late?

Lord James Selvick has grown up with Charlotte, but he would never admit his romantic feelings for her. Even though he enjoys teasing her about her rise in society, when men start falling at her feet, jealousy will conquer his soul. Little did he know he would have to compete with his long-lasting enemy to win his best friend and soulmate back...

If only James could turn back time and find the strength to confess his deep love...

As Lady Charlotte feels lost within high society and James is trying to protect her, they will both find themselves forced to finally face their true emotions for each other. Yet, when the wicked Lord Martin shows his true colors, Charlotte will be trapped between her reputation and a loveless future. Will James finally find the way to Charlotte's heart?

Will the two soulmates overcome the grim reality and create their own special fairytale?

Prologue

James Selvick, heir to the title of Earl of Ashburnham, stood at the river's edge and hurled a smooth, flat rock across its glistening waters.

"One, two, three, four!" he counted aloud as the rock skimmed across the surface. "I bested all of you!" His shoulder-length brown locks fell into his eyes, as they often did, and he pushed them aside with the back of his hand.

Charlotte Clarke, daughter of Sir Everette Clarke, stepped up beside him, her wild blonde hair billowing in the wind. She had tucked the back of her ankle-length skirts up into the front of her belt, effectively creating Indian balloon pants like they had seen in books.

Her face was smudged with dirt, but she looked incandescently happy. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she bumped James' shoulder, sending him careening to the side and nearly toppling into the water.

"Hey!" James laughed, pushing her back. "Calm down, you wild cat."

"That wasn't anything special," she said, kneeling on the river's rocky shore as she looked for the perfect skipping stone. James rolled his eyes. Charlotte was nine years old, the only girl of five boys in the Clarke family. Her eldest brother, Thomas, was his best friend.

Ever since her family had come to the neighbourhood, the children of the Selvick and Clarke families had been fast friends. Charlotte was always tagging along with them, even though she was a girl. She could out-climb all four of her older brothers as well as James and

threw a mean left-hook. Charlotte so much like one of the boys that they had affectionately dubbed her "Charlie."

"There, now," she said when she had found a thin, smooth white stone. She stood up and closed her left eye, taking aim at the surface of the water. She threw the rock, flicking her wrist expertly.

"One, two, three, four, five!" she yelled, counting as James had done. "See? I told you. I can do anything just as well as a boy. Better even." She said haughtily. She planted her hands on her hips, giving him an impish grin. That was an invitation, James knew. He turned on her and growled like a bear, chasing her up the embankment. She gave a squeal of delight and ran, her laughter mixing with James' as it echoed over the water.

"Get back here!" he cried, giving another bear growl. He threw his arms out and pretended to have giant claws, swiping the air as he chased her.

Charlotte did not look back as she hurried up the steep bank, scurrying up a large oak tree near the river. James was right on her heels, but he knew that she was a faster climber. Bark and crusty moss fell into James' eyes from above, impeding his pursuit.

He wiped them and darted after her, nearly grabbing her ankle—but she was too quick for him. When he reached the highest branch, she was already shimmying down on the opposite side of the tree.

Charlotte's brothers joined them at the base of the tree trunk, yelling encouragement to James.

"Come on, old chap! Catch her!"

Her four older brothers looked like hunting hounds, baying at the prey.

"Charlie, you've done it again," the youngest brother, Benjamin, said. He was just a year older than Charlotte.

When Charlotte landed on the ground with a thud, her eldest brother, Thomas, grabbed hold of her arms. She struggled to get free, but she was no match for him at the ripe old age of fifteen, even though she was scrappy. "Hold tight, there, Charlie. You'll tear your dress even worse, and then what would Mama say?"

James landed with a thud next to her, smiling at her with a satisfied grin. "You beat me again, Charlie. I don't mind it so much, 'cause you're lighter and thinner than I am."

Charlotte stuck out her tongue at him. "I could best you even if I were the same age and height. You've never been as good at climbing trees as me."

The group all agreed. Daniel and Francis, Charlotte's two other brothers had joined in. Twelve-year-old Daniel was tall and lanky, like James; conversely, Francis, at thirteen, had acquired the height and muscle of a full-grown man. James thought it was because he mainly ate meat, sneaking the vegetables under the table to the dogs every chance he got.

The Clarke home was much more relaxed than his own. Charlotte's father had made his fortune as a merchant, rather than inheriting his fortune as James' father had done. Her father allowed the dogs to sit under the table while they ate, and their meals were far less formal than the ones James' mother put on.

"Come on, let's go swimming," Benjamin suggested. Charlotte hung her head. Her mother had agreed to let her play with the boys, but under no circumstances was she allow her to swim with them, afraid that she would drown.

Her four brothers filed off down toward the bank, but James hung back, wiping the sweat from his brow. "It's alright, Charlie. I'll stay on the shore with you. We can put our feet in, at least."

Charlotte brightened at the idea and was soon running off down the bank toward the water. James laughed at her childlike anticipation. Her blonde curls were a mass of tangles, with twigs and leaves woven throughout.

Her once-white frock was caked with mud and grass stains. Her little blue apron had been discarded somewhere along the riverbank and was probably floating helplessly downstream by now. James walked up beside her and sat down on the pebbly beach. "You're never going to find a husband, looking the way you do," he teased.

Charlotte sank down into the muddy earth and grimaced. "I keep telling Mama that I do not want a husband. I shall stay here with her and Papa always." She took off her shoes and stockings and threw them up onto the grass-covered bank above them. He followed her example, and they both stepped out into the shallow water. He squished his toes into the sandy mire. The water felt good as it swirled around his ankles.

"You have to get married someday, Charlie. All girls do—if they don't want to end up a spinster, or in the workhouse."

"Papa said I would never end up in the workhouse, even if I don't marry. He has plenty of money. Besides, I could always get a job as a cook, or a gardener." Charlotte seemed very sure of herself, and James had to hold back a laugh. He was nearly four years older than Charlotte and had been exposed to the outside world. It was a cruel place at times. It would be good for him if she stayed with her parents, as she planned to do. He could not imagine Glendoe Manor without her.

"People don't hire women gardeners, you silly." James nudged her shoulder, and she prodded him right back. Laughing, he bent down and splashed water all over her front. She sputtered for a moment and then sprayed him right back.

She kicked water up into his face, squealing with joy as she did. By the time the water fight was over, they were both dripping from head to toe.

They ran out of the water and up the bank, collapsing in a fit of giggles. After a moment, Charlotte quieted, looking sad.

"James, I don't want to marry a stranger and go live somewhere far away. We all have fun, don't we? Why can't things just stay as they are now?" She picked up a pebble and threw it into the water, her anger apparent from her deep frown.

James shrugged, using his pinkie to try and dig some of the water out of his ear. "We will all have to grow up someday, Charlie." He lay

down on his side in the grass, propping himself up on his elbow to face her. "How about this: if you don't find a husband by the time you're twenty, I'll come back from my travels and marry you myself. What do you say to that?"

James had grand plans to travel all over the world when he was old enough. He would see every country and culture before he had to come back and be tied down to life as an earl. His father was grooming him for taking over when he passed away, and James was not eager for the responsibility. Still, he comforted himself that he would likely be in his thirties or forties before his father passed away.

Charlotte's eyes shone with unshed tears. James sat up straighter, feeling a pang of guilt stab at his heart. Charlotte tried to act tough, but when she showed her fear or anxiety in these rare moments, a fierce protectiveness rose inside him. He had been teasing her, but she looked at him with such seriousness that his heart began to hammer.

"Would you really do that for me?" she asked. "Do you promise? Truly?" Her eyes held such fervency, and he was almost sorry for teasing her about such a serious subject.

He sat up straighter and took her hand. "I swear it, Charlie. You won't have to go to the workhouse if you can't find a husband. I promise." A slow smile crept over her features, and he noticed for the first time how pretty she was. She would probably be quite beautiful when she grew up and cleaned the mud off of her face.

"Ewww!" Francis declared as he splashed out of the water, dressed only in his breeches. His bare chest heaved, out of breath from wrestling his brothers in the river. "Charlie and James are holding hands!" He screwed up his face at them. James let her hand drop as if it were on fire.

"It was nothing," James said, standing and wiping off his hand on his trousers. Hurt filled Charlotte's eyes for a moment, but then she also stood and wiped off her skirt.

"Yes, it was nothing," she agreed quickly. When she looked up at him once more, all signs of her hurt feelings were written on her features. "I'm going home." Her announcement was flat as she turned to walk away. James followed her for a few paces, whispering a rushed apology.

"Charlie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No," she interrupted. "You're right. It was nothing. Silliness! Go back and swim, James. I know you want to. I won't get in your way." She then stomped off up the hill toward her house, her blonde tangles bouncing against her back.

Francis was waiting for him when he came back down the hill. He shook his head, letting a long sigh escape through his barely parted lips.

"What was that all about?" He asked, slapping James on the back good-naturedly. "I hope Charlie wasn't being a nuisance. Mama says we can always send her home when she starts to be too much of a handful."

"No, she is fine," James said. "I think I hurt her feelings, that's all. It's nothing. You know her. It'll blow over, and then she'll be back to her old self in no time." But in the back of James' mind, he wondered if this time was different. Charlie was not the emotional type, but James had to remind himself that she was still just a girl under all her brave display.

He walked back down to the water's edge, pasting a smile on his face for Francis' benefit. But deep down, he wondered if Charlie ever would get married someday. Or would she forever be one of the boys?

Chapter 1

England, 1813

"Curve your hands more, Charlotte. You must round your fingers as if you are holding an orange. Like this."

Her governess held up both hands, clasping one over her fist and then taking it away to show just how much curve she needed. Charlotte sighed heavily. Would she ever be able to get this right? A yelp sounded outside the open window of the parlour, and Charlotte looked out, gazing longingly as Francis and Daniel rushed by with their fencing swords. Daniel laughed as he rounded a tree, dodging a thrust from Francis.

Her governess, Miss Hegarty, clapped her hands loudly, startling Charlotte out of her reverie.

"You must focus, Charlotte. Now, try it again."

The older woman had been employed when Charlotte was thirteen in hopes of moulding her into a fine young lady. Miss Hegarty was strict and demanded perfection in everything. Charlotte couldn't help but wonder if she would ever rise to Miss Hegarty's exacting demands.

She curved her hands and placed them gently on the ivory and ebony keys. She began to play, wincing apologetically as she missed several notes. It did not help that Miss Hegarty stood over her shoulder, staring through her very soul, it seemed. She glanced out the window once more as the boys made more racket. They looked like they were having a wonderful time.

Charlotte forced herself to look away, pasting her gaze to the sheet music in front of her. Being a well-bred young lady, as her mother called it, was not her idea of fun. No matter how much she longed for the old, carefree life she had shared playing and roughhousing with her brothers, she knew it could not go on.

She had made enormous strides over the last two years. She had learned to play the piano tolerably well, even if Miss Hegarty was disappointed; she had learned to draw and embroider, as well—all of these qualities were things that a man looked for in a wife. Soon, they would all know whether or not all of her hard work had paid off.

Her fingers stumbled again, and Miss Hegarty let out a frustrated sigh. "What is the matter with you today, Charlotte? Do I need to close the window?" She moved to do so, and Charlotte was disappointed when her brother's voices were silenced. That was the one thing about being a lady that drove her to distraction. Why did everything have to be so quiet? A lady does not raise her voice. A lady does not share her own opinions.

Charlotte was still not used to holding her tongue. Miss Hegarty said she was worse than a mule braying in the stables sometimes. "You will never find a husband if you don't learn to bridle your tongue!"

Her mother looked up from the novel she was reading and gave her a worried frown. "What ever is the matter, dearest?"

Charlotte looked up, silently pleading for her mother to save her from the gruelling piano lesson. "I am nervous about the presentation." She let her hands fall off the keys, clasping them in her lap.

Her mother set her book aside and waved her over.

"That is enough for now, Miss Hegarty. Thank you," she said to the other woman. Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief when her governess gave a slight curtsy and left the room.

"It is a wonder I do anything right with Miss Hegarty breathing down my neck. Believe you me, if I had known how difficult it would be to turn myself into a proper young lady, I would have never set out on this endeavour," Charlotte teased.

Her mother reached over and patted her hand, trying to give encouragement. "You are doing very well, my dear, no matter what Miss Hegarty says. And try not to worry about the presentation. I am sure you will do just fine." Her mother picked up a small silver bell and rang it several times, its high-pitched tinkling shrill in its proximity to Charlotte's ear. She scooted away, holding a hand over her assailed eardrum.

Her mother laughed, setting down the bell on the side table. "Really, Charlotte. You can stand your brother's yelling and screaming, but not a tiny bell? You are a conundrum, sometimes."

Charlotte shared a laugh with her mother. "It is strange, isn't it?" She did not say that she much preferred her brothers' obnoxious belling to the silence that now enveloped her life.

"No matter. I'll call for some tea. You are simply over-tired from your preparations for the presentation. You've worked hard these last two years. You should take some time to rest before we leave for London." Her mother turned to speak with the butler, calling for tea and sandwiches for both of them.

When the servant had disappeared once more, her mother took Charlotte's hand. "Is there something else worrying you, dearest? You have dark circles under your eyes."

Charlotte unconsciously touched her face, looking for the unwanted intruders. "I have not been sleeping well lately. I've been so worried about being presented at court. Is it not possible to forgo the whole affair and still come out into society?" Charlotte chewed her lower lip in her anxiety.

"Nonsense. You have worked too hard for too long to eschew such an honour. A well-bred young lady of means like yourself cannot enter society without being presented to their Majesties."

They both turned as the door opened and in poured her three older brothers, now with her younger brother, Andrew, trailing behind them. At nine years old, he was significantly younger than the rest of them. Mama had always called him her surprise baby. They were all talking in a jumble, each one trying to be heard over the other.

Charlotte smiled at their antics, missing her place in the midst of them. Their mother waved a hand at them, shushing them.

"Really, boys! Quiet down. Your sister is under enough stress as it is without you adding to it."

"What does Charlie have to be stressed about?" Francis' eyes sparkled with impish delight. "All she does is sit in here and play piano or knit, or whatever it is young ladies occupy themselves with."

Charlotte stuck out her tongue at him. "You couldn't do any of the things I am required to do."

"Charlotte," her mother corrected him. "You must not call her Charlie anymore, boys."

"Why not? Daniel pouted. "I can understand while we are in company, but why can we not call her Charlie when it is just us?" He sauntered over to his sister and sat beside her on the couch, tousling her long, blonde curls. She swatted him away but laughed nonetheless. Charlotte fixed her hair, brushing the long wisps out of her eyes. Daniel tugged at the back of her hair, ignoring the glare she shot up at him as he listened to his mother scold them all. A sideways grin played at his lips, and he winked at her.

Charlotte tried not to play favourites with her brothers, but Daniel was the one she confided in. At twenty years old, she had no doubt that he would soon find a wife and have no further use for his little sister. She was trying to soak up all the time she could with him.

"She is seventeen now. It is not right that you continue to call Charlotte by a nickname given to her when she was six. Especially a boys' nickname."

"Charlie isn't really a girl, is she, though?" little Andrew asked. "I mean, not in the regular way."

"Of course, she is, stupid," Francis retorted. Their mother threw him a warning look. Francis was the more serious type, quiet and

methodical, with strength like a bear. Charlotte would have classified his temperament as more suited to a dark mosque, studying ancient scripts in a dimly lit room. She would be surprised if he ever married.

"Don't call your brother stupid," their mother reprimanded. She turned to her juvenile son. "Andrew, Charlotte is a young lady and deserves respect as your older sister. We must all pull together and help her make the best impression this Season."

Andrew rolled his eyes and sat down on the rug at her feet.

"I liked it much better when we could climb trees together," he mumbled. Charlotte tousled his hair and gave him a knowing look. I liked it better, too.

Andrew looked up at his mother and sighed. "Why does she have to go away and get married?"

"It isn't like she is leaving tomorrow, Andrew," Daniel interjected. "Even if she does find someone she wants to marry, it won't be for a few years, will it mother?"

Charlotte blushed at the daunting task before her. As the only daughter in her family, she would need to marry if she was going to secure her place in society. Her father had set aside a sizable dowry for her, but the bulk of his wealth would go to her brothers.

"Not necessarily. If she finds a gentleman whom she wants to marry, I do not see why she could not find herself married by the end of the summer," her mother responded cheerfully.

Daniel shot Charlotte an alarmed grimace. "This summer?"

Charlotte looked up at him sadly and nodded. "Yes. And you will be happy for me, won't you, brother?" Daniel would be the hardest one for her to be separated from. He shifted uneasily in his seat, draping his arm over the back of the couch.

"I suppose. If I must," he mumbled.

A knock sounded at the door, and the butler entered.

"Ah, Danby, there you are," Lady Clarke said. "Would you bring more cups please? And we will need more sandwiches and petit fours. These rascals have gobbled them all up before Charlotte or I got one of them."

Charlotte smiled. Her brothers had indeed made short work of the refreshments.

"Of course, my lady. And Sir Clarke wanted me to tell you that all is ready for your departure in the morning."

"Will he not join us for tea?" her mother asked, disappointed.

"He had to ride over to Faldwell Park and speak with Lord Selvick, my lady. He will be back before the gong, though."

"Very good, Danby. Thank you," she said, dismissing him.

Charlotte envied her parents. They seemed to miss each other if they were separated from each other for even a few moments. Charlotte hoped that she found a husband with whom she could share a close relationship. Her parents had their troubles, of course, just like any married couple. But they never let the sun go down on their anger, just as the Good Book advised.

Not all couples were so lucky, however. Would Charlotte be able to find a man that would not only provide for her needs but cherish her heart and dreams, as well?

Just then, the door opened, and her eldest brother, Thomas, walked in with his new wife, Sarah. Charlotte's mood brightened immediately. She had become fast friends with Sarah. Her feisty nature and unadulterated good sense made her the perfect addition to the Clarke family. As she made her way into the room—the only brunette in a horde of blondes—she bent and kissed her mother on the cheek.

"Well, are you all ready for our trip to London tomorrow?" Sarah then came to Charlotte's side and linked her arm through hers.

"As ready as I can be," Charlotte answered. Thomas followed his wife, nodding in her direction. At twenty-three, he rarely joined in with their brothers' shenanigans, but every once in a while, he could be persuaded to take part in a foot race or an impromptu wrestling match.

"Hello, Charlotte," he greeted her. He then sat down to listen to Andrew recount the morning's adventures. Charlotte loved to watch her eldest and youngest brother interact. Even though there was a

sixteen-year gap in their ages, Thomas always made time for little Andrew.

Sarah patted her hand and leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "Do not worry. You will be splendid at the presentation. It is not as daunting as everyone makes it seem."

Charlotte thanked her, but in the back of her mind, she could only hope that she would be deserving of her family's faith in her.

Chapter 2

James was in his study, attending to some last-minute business with his tenant farmers. He was due to leave for London with his mother and younger twin sisters soon. Lyda and Jewelle were thirteen now, something that was hard for James to believe. Within a couple of years, it would be their turn to be presented at court. James was not looking forward to the pressure of finding his sisters suitable husbands.

His mother did little to help him these days. Ever since his father's passing three years prior, she had seemingly retreated; she mostly kept to herself, reading novellas, or embroidering cushions.

As a result, James, Lyda, and Jewelle had grown even closer. His sisters were dear girls, like opposite sides of the same coin. Lyda was the quiet, logical sister, while Jewelle was more compulsive and spirited. She reminded him of Charlie in many ways.

Smiling, he penned the last few words of his missive and set down the quill. He then put it through the blotter, folded it and sealed it.

As he put the letter on a pile with several others, a knock sounded at the study door.

“Come in!” he called, not bothering to look up.

“What are you still doing in here, brother?” Jewell asked as she came in, Lyda trailing a few paces behind with her nose in a book. Jewelle came around the desk and poked at the pile of letters. “We are due to

leave for London tomorrow morning, and all you can think about is your dreary letters.”

James laughed, leaning back in his chair. He let out a long sigh, glad that his work was done for the day. “I had several things to take care of so that I can enjoy myself once we get to London.”

Jewelle shrugged, saying nothing more about it. He raised a brow at Lyda. Her lips moved as she read the last few pages of her book.

“I suppose that book is more fascinating than your big brother?” he teased. Lyda’s eyes flicked up to meet his for a split second before they flew back down to the page.

“Almost done,” she said in a hurry. Sitting down in the chair before the desk, her eyes darted from side to side as she read. He was glad she had a love for the written word, although she sometimes got stuck in her own world. He wished that some of that love would have transferred to Jewelle, who found it hard to apply herself when it came to her studies.

A moment passed while he and Jewelle waited for Lyda to finish. When she finally did, she closed the book with a satisfying thwack and looked up at them with a contented smile.

“There. Another happy ending, I’m afraid.”

James couldn’t help but chuckle. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No, I suppose not. But sometimes it is awfully predictable.” Lyda

stood, setting the book down in the vacated seat. “Did you tell him?”

James looked up at Jewelle. “Tell me what?”

“We saw Charlotte riding up the drive a few minutes ago with Daniel and Francis.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” He stood abruptly and went over to the window. The drive was void of visitors, save for a few flitting birds searching for seeds in the gravel. The butler appeared in the doorway at that moment, announcing his friends. James turned and greeted them, shaking both of the boys’ hands. “How good of you to come by. I did not think we would have the pleasure of seeing you this afternoon with all the preparations for leaving for town.”

“Mama wanted us to stay, but I wanted to go for one last ride before setting off in the morning. Perseus deserved one last hurrah before we are gone for the summer.” Charlotte said with an air of sadness.

James chuckled. “You almost sound like you would rather stay home.”

Charlotte shrugged, smoothing down her skirts. She put on a brave face, but he could tell that she was trying to conceal her nerves. “I will be more at ease once the presentation is over and done.”

James nodded. “I am sure you will do well. You always excel at everything you put your mind to.”

“Not everything,” she mumbled.

He decided not to press her, at least not in front of her brothers. "Shall we go for a stroll in the gardens? I've just finished with some estate business, and I could arrange for tea to be brought to the Greek pavilion?"

His father had ordered the garden folly before he was born—a round structure with great Greek columns that held up a dome with a tall spike on top. It had been meant for a mere decoration when it had first been built, but it had become a favourite haunt of the Clarke and Selvick children over the years.

"That would be lovely," Charlotte said. Daniel, Francis, and the twins led the way out of the study and out into the gardens. Charlotte took a deep breath as they stepped into the sunshine, and a bit of her unease seemed to melt away. James stopped in the doorway to speak to the butler and order the tea and refreshments and then joined her on the terrace.

"Are you really that anxious about the presentation?" James asked.

Charlotte looked up at him, shielding her eyes with her delicate hand. She had a light shawl draped over her shoulders, and as they walked, it slipped down her back and hung loosely over her arms. Her back was straight, with her head held high.

When had she become so graceful, so elegant? James tore his eyes away, clasping his hands behind his back as they walked. The others were a rambunctious lot, Daniel and Francis arguing some point of the law. Francis was always trying to start a fight when it came to politics.

"I am nervous, to be sure. But Mama says I don't have anything to worry about, either." Charlotte's profile was lit by the late afternoon sun, giving her skin an almost ethereal glow. Wisps of blonde hair framed her face, and for a moment, James could not find his voice. Why was his heart beating so fast?

He cleared his throat and tried to gain control of his racing pulse. "She is right, Charlie. You will be radiant when you meet the king and queen, I am sure."

Charlotte halted in her tracks, a slight frown marring her lovely features. "You mustn't call me Charlie anymore."

James was taken aback for a moment, and he looked around as if she had forgotten who she was talking to. "What do you mean? We've always called you Charlie."

Charlotte let out a frustrated sigh. "Yes, but I am not a child anymore. It was just as well you all called me Charlie while I was climbing trees and running through the creek. But I am a young lady; Mama says you must all call me Charlotte now."

"What a pity. Are your tree-climbing days over, then?" James tried to make light of the situation and continued walking. He offered her his arm, which she did not take right away.

"Promise me, James. I need to look the part if I am to win a husband. If you and my brothers continue to call me Charlie, how will that look?"

At last Charlotte took his arm after a long pause, and they continued

to stroll down the winding gravel path. Pink, yellow, and white roses in full bloom stretched toward the sunshine and seemed to nod their heads up and down in the gentle breeze. James plucked a delicate blossom, twirling it in his fingers before presenting it to her.

"I promise," he said, feeling an aching sadness come over his heart as he did. Why should he care whether she wanted him to call her Charlotte or Charlie? It should make little difference to him. But it did make a difference, and James could not put his finger on exactly why. "So, who is this new Charlotte that I shall have to get used to addressing like a lady? Does she have her eyes set on a certain duke or viscount?"

Their siblings were already halfway to the Greek pavilion, marching quickly over the rolling grass-clad hills. Their laughter rang out over the meadow, reaching James and Charlotte. They were still far behind in the landscaped parterre. They came to the garden's edge, separated from the open field by a long, low stone wall. James led her down the three steps that took them out into the meadow, and then she let go of his arm.

"I have no prospects as of yet, but Mama says I should have no trouble finding any number of suitable prospects once I am out. I think it helps that I am pretty and have a sizable dowry." She said this very matter-of-factly, without an ounce of arrogance. Charlotte had never been pretentious; it made her all the more lovely.

He couldn't help but chuckle at the casual way she discussed her own beauty. "I am sure the dowry helps. But do not let yourself be charmed by just anyone. You are too predisposed to trust people. Not everyone is as they seem when you first meet them."

Charlotte brushed this last comment off with a laugh and a wave of her hand. "You sound like Thomas. Do not worry about me. I shall be careful with whomever I choose to give my heart to, I promise."

James felt his throat go dry with her flippant remark of giving her heart away. He lowered his gaze for a moment, and when he looked back up at her, she was smiling at him. He had always looked at Charlotte like another little sister. But she was right—she was not a little girl anymore. She was a young woman, and a beautiful one at that. Soon she would be facing all sorts of gentlemen in London. Some were honourable, and others were cads. How could he protect her? He supposed it was not his job but her father and brother's responsibility.

He cleared his throat once more and motioned for her to continue with him to the pavilion. Daniel and Francis were re-enacting a sword fight of some sort, drawing thrills of laughter from the twins. "At any rate, you should be glad. If I do find a match, as Mama supposes, you will not have to make good on your promise." Charlotte was teasing him now, but he did not recall what she was talking about.

"Oh? And what promise is that?"

"Do you not remember? When I was nine you promised that you would marry me if I had not found a husband by the time I was twenty." She laughed, shaking her head. Her blonde curls bounced as she moved her head, making his throat go dry once more. "I was such a fool back then, thinking I could get away from marriage. You were right. We have all grown up and now it is time to look to the future. Thomas was the first to marry, and I suppose we will all not be too far behind him. It is not all bad, though, as I had feared when we were younger. Sarah and Thomas are a good match, and they love each other, so it must be possible for the rest of us."

James had forgotten about his long-ago promise, but her reminder made his heartache in a way he could not quite understand. "Yes, I hope so. That is all I want for you Charlie, I mean, Charlotte. I beg your pardon. It may take me a while to change that habit."

"It is perfectly understandable. I've had to change so much the last couple of years. Sometimes I don't recognize myself when I look in the mirror."

James said nothing to this. To him, he would always see her as the feisty, strong, independent girl with whom he had spent his childhood. Now, all of that was coming to a close, and he resented that the years had flown by so quickly. James could not help but feel at a loss as they neared the pavilion and joined the others. Everything about their lives was about to change.

Chapter 3

Charlotte stood in front of the mirror trying to calm her frayed nerves. Her white silk gown had been embroidered with gold flowers and leaves, giving her an aerial glow. Her blonde curls were piled on top of her head in the latest fashion, with a tremendous, white ostrich feather sticking out from the top of her head. She did not understand the style, but her mother had insisted. You do not want to be the only young woman without a feather, do you?

She had capitulated in the end, feeling like a preening peacock. Simultaneously, she felt weighed down by the family jewels; the sapphire and diamond necklace that her mother had given her felt cold against her ivory throat. A pair of earrings with the same gemstones graced her earlobes, and she had on a matching bracelet as well. Never in her life had she worn so much jewellery. She felt out of place and awkward, like did not deserve such luxuries—what if she broke or lost them?

She gulped several times, trying to calm herself. "Breathe, Charlotte. Just breathe."

Her mother opened the door and came in just as Charlotte's maid put the finishing touches on her hair. She placed a silver and diamond tiara on her head, and Charlotte stood there and stared at her reflection, in awe.

"Oh, my dear," her mother breathed. "You look positively radiant!"

Charlotte took the long, white gloves that her maid offered her and started to slip them on. Her mother helped her smooth the silky fabric up to her arms, the hem ending just below her elbow.

"Do you really think so, Mama?" Charlotte's voice shook as she spoke, and she swallowed hard once more to try to rid her throat of the lump forming there. She needed to get a hold of herself.

"You do, dearest. Do not doubt yourself. You will do just fine, if you remember this one thing I am about to tell you."

Charlotte turned away from her reflection and focused on her mother's familiar features. Lady Clarke took her hands and gave them a light squeeze.

"Be yourself," she said. Charlotte let out a breath and gave a weak laugh.

"Yes, Mama. I will try," she promised.

"Now, we should away. We do not want to be late." Her mother hurried her out of the room, her maid helping her smooth out the long train behind her as she went. Charlotte walked down the hall to the grand staircase, feeling every beat of her heart. All the hard work of the last two years would determine how this evening played out.

She straightened her spine and held her head up high as she walked gracefully down the staircase. Her brothers stood at the bottom of the landing, and a hush came over the room as she made her entrance. Sarah turned from where she had been speaking with her husband and gave a gasp of pride as she walked down the steps.

Daniel came to her side and took her hand as she stepped down the last stair. He held her hand up and bid her turn, showing off her

gown.

"Well, what do you say, brothers? Doesn't our little sister look splendid?"

"Looks nothing like the Charlie I know," Francis piped up. His eyes were alight with their usual mischief, and Charlotte felt some of her nerves dissipate at their familiar ribbing.

"That's because I'm not the old Charlie, remember?" That girl is long gone, she thought with some dysphoria.

"She looks like a gaudy wedding cake," Andrew said, his nine-year-old estimation somewhat on point. Charlotte wished again that she could take the ostrich feathers out of her hair. "I still don't understand why I cannot go."

"You are too young, Andrew. Do not worry, we will come and collect you from the Selvick's on our way home. You always like spending time with Lyda and Jewelle, do you not?"

"They're alright—for girls, I suppose." Andrew and her mother's conversation was interrupted by Francis.

"What is this frippery?" he asked, screwing up his nose at her. He stuck his finger out and jostled the ostrich feathers back and forth. Charlotte moved backward, nearly tripping on the long train of her gown.

"Leave your sister alone!" Their mother came down the steps, glaring

at her boys. "Francis, I expect more from you."

Francis let out a sigh and stepped away, joining Benjamin at the door. Benjamin had remained silent all this time, only laughing in unison with his brothers while they teased her. He gave her an appreciative nod, his gaze understanding.

She gave him a weak smile in return, appreciating his quiet reassurance. Benjamin was more of a poet at heart. He had never really enjoyed her brothers' feats of strength and daring. He had followed along with her and her brothers as they had torn about the countryside, jotting notes in a leather journal.

Sarah appeared at her side and took her hands, holding her at arm's length. "You look absolutely beautiful, Charlotte. You will be the most beautiful girl there, if I am not mistaken—and I rarely am," she added as an aside. Charlotte laughed and looked up for approval from Thomas as he joined them.

"I agree, sister. You will outshine them all. Now, should we not get into the carriages, Mama?"

"Yes, we should. Where is your father?" She went to the stairs and called up to her husband. "Sir Clarke! Come down, we are all ready to go!"

"I am here, woman. Desist your shouting," her father teased as he made his way across the hall from where he had been working in his study. "You look beautiful, daughter. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I think so," Charlotte said. Her father was the quiet sort as well and had never said much to her in the way of encouragement. He preferred to leave that to her mother. The rare occasions that he did offer reassurance were precious to her.

Her mother rushed them out the door and into the two awaiting carriages. Charlotte sat next to the window, taking in the view of London as they made their way to the palace. Everything seemed to be dancing with colour, the whole city alive with excitement. And for that one moment, she willed herself to enjoy each remaining minute. When she came out of the palace that evening, she would no longer be a child, but a young woman.

When they arrived at the palace, she and her mother were taken to a room adjoining the court. The room was filled to the brim with young girls and the older women presenting them. An eternity seemed to pass as Charlotte waited her turn. She did her best not to fidget, but her mother had to remind her several times not to crinkle the fabric of her dress as she bunched it around her gloved fingers.

Finally, Charlotte's name was called. Her mother touched her arm, trying to offer some last bit of encouragement. "Head held high. You are a Clarke, Charlotte. Be proud of that."

Charlotte could only nod, that lump of nervousness having settled in her throat again. She walked through the doors into the courtroom and instantly felt every gaze on her. An appreciative whisper seemed to circulate throughout the room, but she kept her eyes trained on the dais.

The king looked bored as she walked to the front of the room. She held her head high as directed, smiling demurely. She dipped into a deep curtsy when she reached the dais, holding her pose until the queen bid her rise. She kept focused on the floor before her, as was the custom.

"Rise, my dear," the queen said, her voice deep and resonant. Charlotte looked up at her aged face and smiled. The queen held out

her hand, and Charlotte stepped up onto the first step of the dais. She took the monarch's hand and kissed it.

Don't trip, she rehearsed over and over in her mind. She then backed away and joined her mother at the bottom step once more, holding her hands loosely at her sides.

She hoped the nervousness did not show on her face. After a long pause, the queen finally returned her smile. "Beautifully done, Miss Clarke."

The queen then nodded, effectively ending the interview. Charlotte curtsied again and backed away down the aisle with her mother. When they were safely out in the hall, she hugged her mother and dissolved into relieved laughter.

"Very well done, Charlotte. It is rare that the queen says a word!"

"Thank you, Mama. It all happened so fast."

"It always does. What did I tell you? People make such a big hullabaloo about it, and it's over in a matter of minutes. But I will say it again, dearest—very well done!"

Her father and brothers joined them in the grand hall for a reception when the presentations were over. Her father was all smiles and congratulated her in his usual quiet way.

"Thank you, Father," Charlotte smiled as he took her hand and gave it a light pat. He moved away toward the beverage table to chat with one of his friends from parliament. Charlotte tried not to let her disappointment show. She wished that she was closer with her father, especially during this moment, but he could be so distant at times.

She had little time to dwell on these thoughts, for her brothers were soon gathered around her, joshing and offering congratulations.

Francis gave her a solemn nod. "Well, little sister, congratulations. You kissed the queen's hand and somehow that means you are a woman now. Don't ask me why."

"Shush, Francis," their mother chided, albeit gently. "This is a momentous day for Charlotte, and you should be happy for her."

Francis took a sip of champagne and shrugged. "I never said I was not happy for her."

Daniel was next to congratulate her, his warm and genuine smile spreading across his face. "Well done, little sister. How do you feel?"

Charlotte gave a short laugh. "Much the same as when I came in."

Except she was not so nervous now. She had done it! Now she could settle into town and look forward to some normality. She looked around the room at the other debutantes and noticed how they were already being introduced to young gentlemen. Charlotte had still not been approached by anyone who was not her family. Perhaps they thought her brothers were suitors?

"Come, dearest. We should head home so you can start preparations for the masquerade ball this evening." Her mother started herding her toward the door. Charlotte looked back, disappointed that she had not made any introductions yet; all the other girls were meeting people already.

"Mama, would it not be beneficial for me to stay for a while and meet some gentlemen? Perhaps the boys could go home with Father now and you and I could stay for a time?"

It was Thomas that objected.

"On the contrary. Every young gentleman will be looking forward to meeting you this evening at the masquerade. If you leave now, it will give you an air of mystery." He whispered the last part with a conspiratorial tone. He winked at her, and she smiled.

"Very well." Charlotte agreed. She allowed herself to be escorted from the room by her eldest brother while her mother went to prise Sir Clarke away from his conversation. Charlotte's heart beat wildly with anticipation. Soon, she would have a line of suitors waiting to see her.

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